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# Promoting rural civilization : Wallaces' Farmer and the Iowa Homestead, 1920-1929

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Promoting rural civilization:  
*Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead*,  
1920-1929

by

Alison M. Phillips Kovac

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: History  
Western History

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa

1996

For Marc, Mom, Dad,  
and the rest of the Daiber, Kovac, and Phillips clans  
who have loved me and put up with me over the duration,  
but especially for Robert William Daiber  
who was a cornbelt farm kid during the twenties.

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## CHAPTER ONE:

## IOWA, COUNTRY LIFE, AND THE 1920S

After World War I concluded in 1918 the western world--with its revolutionary technologies, products, advertising schemes, entertainments, and mores--appeared fundamentally changed. In the minds of many Americans the 1920s seemed to mark the arrival of a new era--a dramatic break with the past. This hiatus was, of course, largely illusion. War had simply illuminated and accelerated changes that had been brewing for decades. One such significant change was reported by the Bureau of the Census in 1920. According to Bureau calculations, the United States had become an urban nation.<sup>1</sup>

Some historians refuse to accept the Bureau's conclusion as evidence of a major watershed in American history. As Paul Carter noted in 1977, the Bureau's definitions of rural and urban populations were completely arbitrary. "By an act of mathematical magic . . . a community of only [2,500] souls became a benighted village, while 2,501 residents constituted a cosmopolis." However faulty or exaggerated the Bureau's interpretation of the 1920 census figures may appear, the great importance assigned to them at the time was unquestionably significant. The response to the census report tells historians

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<sup>1</sup>United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, v. 6, Part I, Agriculture (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1922), 30.

as much--or more--than the statistics. Although reactions to the report varied, one thing is certain: the notion that the status of the nation had changed from rural to urban commanded the public's attention.<sup>2</sup>

This observation comes as no surprise to those familiar with the historical context. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, a phenomenon known as the Country Life Movement focused substantial national attention on the declining rural population. Following a period of depression in the 1890s, agricultural conditions improved in the United States due to appreciating land values, an enlarged market created by industrial and urban growth, an increased gold supply, the completion of a vast railroad network, intensified farming techniques, and improved marketing strategies. At the same time, however, the relative importance of agriculture within the national economy declined--indicated, in part, by the exodus from farms to cities.<sup>3</sup>

Rapid decreases in the rural population alarmed some Americans. Those who became most concerned tended not to be farmers. Instead, the Country Life Movement was perpetrated and

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<sup>2</sup>Paul A. Carter, *Another Part of the Twenties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 2.

<sup>3</sup>See William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America: 1900-1920* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1974), 7-29; Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-15.

led primarily by agricultural professionals, educators, farm journalists, bureaucrats in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and businessmen with a stake in rural welfare. Country Lifers were a heterogeneous group and offered a variety of explanations for the exodus. Those who blamed meager farm profits preached the necessity of making farm life more attractive--more profitable--by teaching farmers to be more efficient. Those who cited low prices for agricultural products wanted to teach farmers better marketing skills. Some indicted a poor rural educational system and sought to improve country schools by instructing children in scientific farming methods and inculcating them with an appreciation for country life. Others found fault with rural churches and emphasized the need to unite rural religious establishments in the cause of social reform. Still others blamed poor country roads and endorsed road improvement programs in order to end rural isolation. Most Country Lifers emphasized the importance of educating the rural population because they believed "that ultimately country people themselves had to resolve rural problems." The reformers believed their primary role was to "disseminate knowledge, provide guidance, remove handicaps, and stimulate the farm population to develop a better rural civilization." Among those who subscribed to the movement were agrarian fundamentalists who believed the nation would suffer if its farm population ceased to thrive. Many Country Lifers, however, were urbanites who

feared that a depopulated countryside would be unable to produce cheap food and fiber to support America's industrial centers.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars suggest that the Country Life Movement died shortly after World War I ended. According to historian William Bowers, the movement subsided when the two wings that comprised it parted ways. In 1919 Country Lifers who had regarded social reform as the most appropriate means by which to improve rural life formed the National Country Life Association. A year later those who had emphasized economic growth as the most essential element of rural reform established the American Farm Bureau Federation. Bowers concluded that the dissolution of the movement revealed its fundamental weakness. Disagreement over the nature of farming--whether it was a business or a way of life--was the Country Life Movement's basic dilemma. Rather than addressing the issue directly, many Country Lifers simply tried to insist that farming was equally a business and a way of life. Efforts to promote reform were rendered ineffective as Country Lifers pulled farmers in two directions at once. Bowers argued that "what was needed to make farmers into businessmen was necessarily destructive of the fundamental values of the traditional agrarian way of life." Eventually the two groups of Country Life reformers despaired of ever formulating workable solutions in the face of these fundamental differences.

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<sup>4</sup>Bowers, 3-5, 31-3, 62-7, 78-9, 84-6.



Reformers broke rank, went their separate ways, and, according to Bowers, the movement faded into insignificance.<sup>5</sup>

Historian David Danbom also concluded that the Country Life Movement ended by 1920--but for slightly different reasons. He believed that Country Life reformers had been discouraged by the lack of enthusiasm with which their efforts had been received by the majority of the rural population. Farm families during the so-called Golden Age of Agriculture appeared to be more offended than anything by prescriptions for rural reform. Rural folk believed sociologists and other experts could make better use of their energies by analyzing urban problems. By 1920 many rural sociologists and other reformers had engaged in a period of critical self-evaluation. They questioned the motives and merits of the Country Life Movement, and many became less convinced that impressing change on America's rural population from the outside was wise policy. As a result, people who remained committed to reform throughout the 1920s devoted less effort to decrying farmers' backwardness and inefficiency and spent more time addressing farmers' economic grievances--recognizing that farmers' financial problems would not necessarily be eliminated as a result of more efficient production.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 28-9, 95.

<sup>6</sup>David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979): 25-127.

Citizens of the United States could afford, by 1920, to be less concerned about the future of food production. American farmers had proven themselves during World War I by responding to the call for increased production and by meeting the demands of the nation and its allies. Once the war ended the public had little reason to accuse farmers of inefficiency and less reason to fear a future plagued by food shortages and high prices. With these worries put to rest, Danbom concluded, the Country Life Movement lost its momentum. Meanwhile, the majority of Americans (never very interested in improving the farm family's lot for its own sake) ceased to be interested in rural reform.<sup>7</sup>

Wartime prosperity enabled a number of fortunate farm families to carry out some of the improvements Country Lifers had recommended, but many issues concerning the quality of rural life were far from resolved. Although the Country Life Movement was finished in terms of its national influence, the concept of rural reform became increasingly meaningful to America's rural citizenry during the early 1920s as agricultural prosperity dwindled, rural populations continued to decline, and farm families grew increasingly aware of and annoyed by the disadvantages of country life when compared to city life.<sup>8</sup>

Conditions in rural Iowa from the turn of the century until World War I were, according to historian Earle Ross, quite

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 119-37.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

favorable. By 1897 the pioneer agricultural phase had given way to the "new agriculture." This new period was characterized by optimism and self-confidence, "unexampled progress and security." Many farmers sought to acquire expertise in business management, and marketing facilities and agencies were standardized and systematized. Prejudice toward "book farming" declined, and agricultural colleges and experiment stations gained popularity. Mechanization of the corn harvest advanced significantly. In addition, drainage districts were established and wetlands reclaimed. Expanding industrialization and urban concentration in America and Europe resulted in a strong demand for staple products and prosperous conditions for Iowa farm families (despite the shrinking of international markets due to economic nationalism and competition from extensive cultivation in pioneer lands). By 1914 Iowa's gross farm income was well over \$1.5 billion. During the same period, however, Iowa's population decreased by over seven thousand. Homeseekers now headed west, south, and north in search of cheaper land. The number of Iowa farms decreased while farm size and tenancy increased.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Earle D. Ross, *Iowa Agriculture: An Historical Survey* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1951), 118-31. Between 1910 and 1920 the value of implements and machinery owned by rural Iowans more than tripled. In 1920 63.6 percent of Iowa's population remained rural, but from 1910 to 1920 its rural population decreased by 1 percent while its urban population increased by 28.7 percent. Between 1910 and 1920 the number of Iowa farms

During World War I Iowa farmers cooperated under the leadership of the Agricultural Extension Department and local farm bureaus to expand production of corn, wheat, oats, hogs, cattle and dairy products. Farmers responded to labor shortages (due to the loss of over 500,000 farmers to the armed services and to factory jobs created by war industry) by utilizing mechanical aids, such as tractors and trucks, as never before. Iowa farmers contributed a great deal to America's effort to win the war with food. During each year of the United States' actual participation in the war Iowans produced "more available food . . . than in any two years [previous] to that time."<sup>10</sup>

Iowa farmers, in the main, believed themselves well remunerated for their trouble. Between 1909 and 1919 the value of all crops produced in Iowa increased by 187.8 percent.

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decreased by 3,605 while the average farm size increased by one acre--from 156 to 157. The average value per Iowa farm of all farm crops increased from \$1,425 in 1909 to \$4,172 in 1919. United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, v. 6, Part I, Agriculture, 30-2; United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, v. 5, Agriculture, 71; United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States Colonial Times to 1970 Part I* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1975), 461.

<sup>10</sup>Ross, 140-4. Between 1909 and 1919 Iowans increased the number of acres devoted to wheat production by 172.9 percent. Iowans decreased the number of acres planted in corn by 222,645 but still increased corn production by more than 29 million bushels. United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, v. 5, Agriculture, 712, 739.

Gains, however, were by no means equally distributed, and both farmers and the public were misled by unprecedentedly high agricultural prices into assuming that conditions were better than they actually were. Most farmers' production costs kept pace with food prices. And, in some cases, cost of production actually outdistanced price. However, the unprecedented volume of demand, the strength of agricultural prices, and the value of land inspired in many Iowa farmers an almost boundless confidence in a prosperous future. Confident that low commodity prices were a thing of the past and that land values (which had increased by 138 percent between 1910 and 1920) would ascend indefinitely, many Iowans--with the approval of local and metropolitan businessmen--assumed new financial obligations instead of liquidating old ones. From 1910 to 1920 the percentage of Iowa farms with mortgages increased to 54.2 percent from 51.2 percent, and the amount of mortgage debt increased to \$489,816,739 from \$204,402,722.<sup>11</sup>

Optimism was bolstered when deflation did not follow on the heels of demobilization. Although the weighted index revealed a relative decline in agricultural prices in the fall and winter of 1919, conditions still looked good for farmers during the summer of 1920 when Iowa agricultural products were

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<sup>11</sup>Ross, 140; United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, v. 5, Agriculture, 710; United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, v. 6, Part I, Agriculture, 32, 46-7.

still worth twice as much as before the war. Hopes for permanent farm prosperity heightened expectations and strengthened interest in farm organizations. No organization in Iowa benefited more from the atmosphere of enthusiasm than did the Farm Bureau, which enjoyed semi-public status during the war effort due to its close collaboration with the Iowa State College Cooperative Extension Service. By July 1918 there were over 38,000 fee-paying members in Iowa's farm bureaus, and in December 1918 the Bureaus of Polk and Marshall counties initiated the formation of an Iowa Farm Bureau Federation to emphasize marketing, transportation, representation, legislation, and education.<sup>12</sup>

Asked to comment on the outlook for the Farm Bureau in 1921, Calhoun County agent C. C. Scott gave an encouraging reply: "Practically every farmer now understands the purpose and mission of the Farm Bureau. They are learning the great value of true cooperation. . . . Since the Farm Bureau takes its membership from all other organizations, it is in position to do what no other organization can do, and therein lies the hope of agriculture." Other responses from Iowa county agents were less optimistic. Reporting after the sudden price collapse during the fall of 1920, several agents foresaw difficult times ahead for the farmer and, potentially, for the Farm Bureau as

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<sup>12</sup>United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1941), 386-7; Ross, 148-9, 152-3.

well. Vard Worstell, the agent in Adams county, believed the outlook for the Farm Bureau was "better than for the individual farmer." If the Farm Bureau proved able to "remedy conditions so that the farmer [could] maintain a status in life equal to that of men in other industries," the future would be bright. If not, dark times awaited the farmer and the Farm Bureau.<sup>13</sup>

In a report on Monroe County, agent Samuel G. Baxter wrote that farmers who were perplexed and disheartened by the downward trend of prices and profits were difficult to interest in extension and Farm Bureau work. A great many farmers, he stated, were "fighting for their very existence in the Farm Business" and "felt that the Bureau should be doing something to save [them] instead of spending time showing [them] how to produce." Convinced that high farm prices were a thing of the past, Baxter believed it was the Bureau's job to make farming more efficient and, hence, more profitable. Only then would farmers be able to develop their homes and communities "in an educational and social way." Similarly, N. G. Malin, Dubuque County agent, noted that while the extension department and county agent service had traditionally emphasized the need for "greater and better production" as the most urgent agricultural

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<sup>13</sup>Annual Narrative Report, County Agricultural Agent, Calhoun County, 1920 (vol. 2), Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames; Ross, 153; Annual Narrative Report County Agricultural Agent, Adams County, 1920 (vol. 1), Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames.

problem, "aroused and organized farmers" were demanding that attention be turned toward what they considered "the real evident problems[, ] the ones that effect [sic] farm profits, mainly the financing and distribution of farm products."<sup>14</sup>

Roy F. O'Donnell, Cerro Gordo County agent, doubted that the Farm Bureau would be able to act effectively in the face of its membership's overwhelming concerns. The Bureau, he wrote, "is experiencing at this time, not only in this county but in every county in the middle west[, ] the greatest difficulties which have beset it since its organization. Everywhere prices are being smashed down far below the cost of production with the result that many of the smaller renters will be forced to abandon farming another year." According to O'Donnell, some of the more radical members of the Farm Bureau wanted to know what the organization was doing to "relieve this situation." Many of these members, he believed, would be unable "to weather the storm and pull thru [sic] the present financial difficulties." O'Donnell intimated that the Bureau would probably not be capable of doing much to help these farmers and needed to alert its members to "the magnitude of the proposition" and to warn them not to expect "impossible things" from the organization.

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<sup>14</sup>Annual Narrative Report, County Agricultural Agent, Monroe County, 1920 (vol. 8), Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames; Annual Narrative Report, County Agricultural Agent, Dubuque County, 1920 (vol. 4), Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames.



The Bureau had had its hands full trying to keep up with the growth of its membership--with the result that neither the local, state, nor the national Farm Bureau organizations were "in a position to handle the problems which were suddenly thrust upon them."<sup>15</sup>

According to Earle Ross, the suddenness and thoroughness of the deflation of agricultural product values were without parallel in previous experience. "From 200 in September the farm index sank to 120 in December [1920] and with continued drastic reduction reached 90 by the end of 1921. In terms of income from leading commodities, grain declined 53 per cent; hogs, 39 per cent; and cattle, 30 per cent." In his 1920 annual report, Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace stated that farmers' enormous output that year had been produced at unusually high expense but was worth \$3 billion less than the smaller crop of 1919 and \$1 billion less than the even smaller crop of 1918. "There is probably no other industry or business," he reported "that could suffer a similar experience and avoid insolvency." Meanwhile, nonagricultural prices remained relatively high, intensifying farmers' distress. In Iowa, farmers' problems were compounded by greatly inflated land values. Speculation had helped to drive up land prices during the war, and farmers had done substantially more buying and

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<sup>15</sup>Annual Narrative Report, County Agricultural Agent, Cerro Gordo County, 1920 (vol. 2), Special Collections, Parks Library, Iowa State University, Ames.

mortgaging under these boom conditions than they had selling. The burden of debt incurred was too much to be borne during an agricultural depression. Between 1921 and 1930 more than three thousand foreclosures took place in fifteen representative Iowa counties, and many renters who had paid high cash rents toward eventual land ownership, could not break even when prices plunged, lost their investments, and were forced to become hired laborers. Farmers' financial difficulties were complicated by the over extension of drainage projects which increased crop acreages and production costs and by freight charges which had been raised during the war and remained high despite deflation. In addition, the effort to improve roads and consolidate schools resulted in an average farm land tax during the 1920s that doubled the prewar average.<sup>16</sup>

Historians have debated whether an agricultural depression existed during the 1920s and disagree concerning the degree of its severity. For the purposes of this analysis, definitive answers to the depression debate are not crucial. Agricultural depression or not, when Iowa farm families compared their standard of living to urban standards, they perceived substantial inequities and feared the possibility that gaps between rural and urban prosperity would grow ever wider.

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<sup>16</sup>Ross, 153-4; United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook 1920* (Washington D. C.: GPO, 1921), 9-10, 17; United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmers in a Changing World: The 1940 Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1941), 346, 779.

"Equality for agriculture," a well-worn slogan of the 1920s, is associated most often with the farm interests' fight for the perennially defeated McNary-Haugen proposal. This highly controversial two-price plan which was supposed to boost the price of farm commodities, raise the farmer's income, and give the farmer purchasing power more nearly equal to that of the urban laborer by protecting the domestic prices of certain farm products, dumping the surpluses at world prices, and charging an "equalization fee" to finance the subsidies. The McNary-Haugen plan for parity died in 1927 (after winning congressional support on two separate occasions) at the hands of Calvin Coolidge's presidential veto.<sup>17</sup>

In many ways, the defeat of the McNary-Haugen proposal symbolized a larger losing battle. The 1920s marked a climax of tension between urban and rural America. During the twenties, rural midwesterners resisted--sometimes successfully--urban influence over a number of cultural and economic issues, such as

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<sup>17</sup>For a description of economic, social, political, and technological conditions in America from 1900-1930 see R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 221-77. See also Gilbert C. Fite, *American Farmers: The New Minority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 29-48; Thomas Johnson, *Agricultural Depression in the 1920s: Economic Fact or Statistical Artifact?* (New York: Garland Press, 1985); Don S. Kirschner, *City and Country: Rural Responses to Urbanization in the 1920s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1970); and William E. Leuchtenberg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

prohibition, immigration, religion, unionization, taxation, and road construction. The election of 1928, according to at least one historian, represented ruralites' final symbolic struggle against all the evils of the urban world. The defeat of Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith, according to this interpretation, represented a defeat of everything Smith stood for in the minds of many rural Americans--liquor, political corruption, crime, labor, immigrants, Catholicism, and the very pit of urban filth, New York.<sup>18</sup>

But rural America won the battle, not the war. Despite all the noise of protest and resistance rural folk made during the decade, the gulf between country and city actually narrowed throughout the 1920s. Farm journals, departments of agriculture, bankers, farm equipment sales staff, farm organizations, and agricultural educational institutions all urged farmers to become more business-minded and efficient. Most farmers, eager to secure larger profits, accepted this advice, and economic competition among farmers intensified. The number of automobiles on farms nearly doubled, hastening the decline of country churches, local trade, community centers, country stores, localism, and rural distinctiveness. Urban social services spread throughout the countryside. Movies dictated tastes and glamorized consumption. Commercial radio

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<sup>18</sup>See James H. Shidler, *"Flappers and Philosophers, and Farmers: Rural-Urban Tensions of the Twenties," Agricultural History* 47 (October 1973): 283-99.

brought urban culture directly into rural homes. By 1930, according to historian James Shidler, the possibility (however slight) that America might support two fundamentally distinctive cultures--one rural-agrarian, the other urban-industrial--had all but vanished: "rural conformity to the collectivized standards of urban mass society had been decided."

Increasingly, "rural" and "urban" became relative terms; so much so that in 1929 social critic Walter Lippmann noted that American farmers tended to be suburban. The tempo of American civilization was unquestionably determined in large cities, and "Agrarian resistance to urbanization was now left to the cranks."<sup>19</sup>

No doubt this outcome seems inevitable to most Americans today, but it has occurred to some scholars, including James Shidler, to ask why rural America failed to retain much of its distinctive quality. Perhaps rural people never paused to think about the magnitude of the changes taking place, or maybe they were more interested in making a good living than they were in maintaining cultural distinctiveness. Shidler, however, blamed the countryside's inability to counteract urban influence primarily on the lack of vision and innovation displayed by rural Americans and their leaders. He criticized the major agrarian figures of the 1920s as too short-sighted,

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<sup>19</sup>Shidler, 297-9. See Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution*, 128.

unpersuasive, and backward-looking to steer rural Americans in an "affirmative" agrarian movement.<sup>20</sup>

Was there truly such poverty of vision among America's rural citizens that they saw no alternative to accepting the ascendant urban-industrial culture other than clinging desperately to the past? This question may be answered only as scholars examine the dreams and attitudes country folk and their leaders shared about the future of rural America--such as those expressed in the pages of two prominent farm periodicals published in Des Moines, Iowa during the 1920s, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead*.<sup>21</sup>

*The Iowa Homestead* has a long and complicated lineage but only developed into a first-rate publication under the ownership of James Melville Pierce beginning in 1885. By the time of his death in 1920, the paper's circulation had reached nearly 150,000. Occasional issues, bulging with advertisements, ran

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<sup>20</sup>Shidler, 285, 299.

<sup>21</sup>The number of people living in the Iowa countryside in 1920 (not including residents of incorporated villages) was 1,050,725--or 43.7 percent of Iowa's total population. *The Iowa Homestead* and *Wallaces' Farmer* together circulated at least 200,000 copies at that time. United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of the Department of Agriculture, 1921* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1921), 504; K. R. Marvin, "Agricultural Journalism in Iowa," in *A Century of Farming in Iowa, 1846-1946*, ed. Members of the Staff of the Iowa State College and the Iowa Agricultural Experiment Station (Ames: Iowa State College Press, 1946), 285.

more than 100 pages. Dante M. Pierce assumed the office of publisher after his father James's death.<sup>22</sup>

Henry Wallace began working for *The Iowa Homestead* two years before James Pierce purchased it. When Pierce obtained the paper he appointed Wallace as editor and devoted himself to publishing. The relationship between Pierce and Wallace grew difficult, however, and Wallace was forced to resign his editorship in 1895 due to "policy differences." Serious disputes had erupted between the two men in 1890 over a cooperative creamery controversy. Wallace had become convinced that many cooperative projects that could never succeed were being promoted by shady creamery equipment salesmen and had set out to expose these practices in the *Homestead*. Pierce forced Wallace to modify his editorial policy, fearing that he would offend advertisers and cause the paper to loose business. In 1894 another conflict took place over the *Homestead's* response to a proposed increase in rail freight rates while Wallace was vacationing in Europe. Wallace learned while still in Europe that the *Homestead's* silence on this issue was considered by some to be an asset to the railroads. Upon returning to Des Moines, Wallace wanted to wage a war of words against the

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<sup>22</sup>Frank Luther Mott, "Farm, Stock, and Dairy Journals," *Palimpsest* 45 (August 1963): 342-6; C. R. F. Smith, "The Iowa Homestead," *Palimpsest* 11 (June 1930): 229-41; C. R. F. Smith, "Wallaces' Farmer," *Palimpsest* 11 (June 1930): 242-4.

proposed hike, but Pierce did not agree. Wallace was fired shortly thereafter.<sup>23</sup>

Wallace's two sons, Henry C. and John P., had obtained a paper of their own in 1894<sup>3?</sup>, so they invited their father to join *Wallaces' Farmer*. He accepted and served as editor until his death in 1916. Henry C. then filled the position as editor until 1921 when he became Warren G. Harding's Secretary of Agriculture. His son, Henry A., who later became Secretary of Agriculture under Franklin D. Roosevelt, then assumed the editorship. Although the paper enjoyed rapid success and became a powerful rival to the *Homestead*, *Wallaces'* never caught up with its older competitor before purchasing it in 1929 for \$2,000,000. Purportedly because he wished to concentrate on other responsibilities, including publication of the *Wisconsin Farmer*, Dante Pierce sold the *Homestead* to the Wallace Publishing Company for a hundred times more than what his father had paid for it. The timing of the purchase was unfortunate for the Wallaces. Publication of the first issue of the consolidated journal, renamed *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, nearly coincided with the Wall Street crash. About the time the merger was being finalized, Henry A. Wallace had sent word from Europe of impending financial catastrophe, but the sale went through. During the Depression the market for advertisers in farm periodicals all but vanished, and the circulation of

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.



*Wallaces' Farmer* and *Iowa Homestead* declined dangerously. By 1932 the Wallace Publishing Company was bankrupt. Three years later Dante Pierce, the Wallaces' chief creditor, bought the consolidated farm paper at sheriff's sale. Pierce managed the paper's business affairs, but Henry A. Wallace continued to serve as editor until 1937.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1920s *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* faced difficult questions about the future of farming and of rural life which they addressed through editorials, columns, contests, and feature stories. Comparing these competitors' perspectives on and prescriptions for agriculture and country life provides important insight as to whether rural Iowans suffered from a lack of vision during the critical decade of the 1920s.

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<sup>24</sup>Mott, 346-8; Smith, "*Wallaces' Farmer*," 244-55; Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, "The Wallaces and Their Farm Paper: A Story of Agrarian Leadership," *Journalism Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1967): 289-96.

CHAPTER TWO:  
THE DRIFT TO THE CITIES

On September 3, 1920, *Wallaces' Farmer* announced that for the first time in the history of the United States the Census Bureau was expected to report that urbanites outnumbered the rural population. The publication predicted that the report would set off a "cry of alarm" among the city press: "We will have . . . the usual flock of editorials dealing with the degeneracy of modern times and the reprehensible conduct of the farm people who have so forgotten their proper duties as to leave the country." A little over a month later *Wallaces' Farmer* provided a detailed account of the census results and confirmed its speculation. Sometime during the previous decade, America had become an urban nation.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the findings of the fourteenth census did not warrant the amount of discussion they generated. It may be argued that census takers blew relatively insignificant statistics out of proportion when they proclaimed the triumph of the city over the country in 1920. Significant numbers of rural residents had been leaving the country for generations. In fact, the 1880 census had revealed that farmers no longer

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<sup>1</sup>"The Drift to the Cities," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (3 September 1920): 2066; "The Census Returns," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (15 October 1920): 2414.

comprised a majority in the United States.<sup>2</sup> And, as previously stated, the terms by which a population was pronounced rural or urban were quite arbitrary. Any town with more than 2,500 residents was designated urban, while a town with fewer than 2,500 people supposedly retained its rural character. Even so, the idea that American cities had outgrown America's rural population seemed to confirm long-standing concerns regarding the tendency of young and old to succumb to the amenities, economic promise, social opportunities, and cultural advantages of city life. That this topic was of great interest to Iowans was illustrated by the attention rival farm papers *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* devoted to the "drift to the cities."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Hurt, 75. "In the entire nation, only about 22 percent of the people were classified as urban in 1860; by 1900 it was 39 percent . . . . There were nearly as many people employed in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits in 1910 as there were in agriculture." By 1920 "only 29.9 percent of Americans still lived on farms." Fite, 8, 19.

<sup>3</sup>*Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* followed census reports and demographic studies throughout the 1920s with interest. *Wallaces'* reported in 1920 that over 51 percent of U.S. citizens resided in cities whereas only 46.3 percent had lived in urban areas in 1910 and that the percentage of Americans living in "the country proper" had dropped from 44.8 percent to 38.8 percent between 1910 and 1920. "The Census Returns," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (15 October 1920): 2414. The *Homestead* reported the total population of the United States at 105,708,771 as of January 1, 1920 with only 48.6 percent living in rural areas. It noted that the urban population had increased from 30.6 percent of Iowa's total in 1910 to 36.4

Both periodicals displayed ambivalent attitudes toward the urbanization trend. On the one hand, they suggested that this movement, which had been taking place in America since the nation's birth, was a natural response to inevitable economic forces. At times the editors even presented the movement as a potential boon to farmers, since those who remained on the land could hope to benefit from an increasing demand for their products. The possibility of greater profits for those who continued to farm did not, however, prevent *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* from decrying the social and cultural consequences of the exodus. As a result, the messages these

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percent in 1920. More than 1.5 million Iowans still lived in rural areas. "Rural and Urban Population," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (10 February 1921): 348. "City Dwellers Now Outnumber Rural Population," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (25 March 1920): 1181; "The Drift to the Cities," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (3 September 1920, 2066; "The Growth of the Cities," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (24 September 1920): 2238; "Rural and Urban Population," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (10 February 1921): 348; "Ebbing Tide of Farm Population," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (28 March 1924): 501; "Farm Population," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (30 July 1925): 1076; "The Census of 1925," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (3 October 1924): 1288; "People on Iowa Farms and in Iowa Towns," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (16 April 1926): 591; "Iowa Farm Facts from 1925 Federal Census Report," *Iowa Homestead* 71 (26 August 1926): 1215; "Final Figures from the Farm Census of 1925" 52 (27 October 1927): 1662; "Why Farmers Are Leaving the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (9 March 1928): 373, 413; "Movement from Farms Slower," *The Iowa Homestead* 73 (15 March 1928): 525; "Farm Population Decreases of Long Standing," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (14 February 1929): 299; "Farm Population Now Smallest in 20 Years," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (28 March 1929): 590; "Iowa Likely to Show Small Increase in Population," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (29 June 1929): 1059.

periodicals conveyed to readers were mixed. The editors of both papers insisted that the farm population would not stay and should not be expected to stay in the country as long as agricultural endeavors were not profitable. At the same time, they frequently advised readers to remain on the farm despite often-bemoaned hardships, arguing that economic conditions were sure to improve and that the benefits of country life outweighed the disadvantages.

During World War I, the United States government called for agricultural mobilization, asking farmers to expand production to support the war effort. War prices enabled farm families (many of whom had been experiencing a period of relative prosperity before the war) to improve their standards of living. After the war ended, prices collapsed, bringing serious consequences for American farmers. Meanwhile, increasing urban industrialization drew more and more people away from the countryside to take good-paying factory jobs as farm mechanization made it possible for those who stayed in rural areas to continue producing ample food and fiber for the burgeoning city populations. But the movement from country to city was neither impersonal nor painless. Those who participated in or witnessed the movement did not necessarily view the process as a simple economic adjustment. The decision to stay on the land or to leave the farm was fraught with emotion. Pulling in one direction were ties to family,

community, landscape, and the rural way of life. Economic, vocational, social, and cultural aspirations often pulled in the opposite direction--the direction of the city.<sup>4</sup>

The drift to the cities prompted much debate over the merits and rewards of farming. While both *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* frequently praised the virtues of farming as a way of life, neither periodical believed there was any particular virtue in farming without making a profit. Their publishers' visions of desirable rural civilization existed solely within the context of commercial agriculture. In fact, both the Wallaces and the Pierces believed that the most basic prerequisite for the improvement of rural society was a more profitable agricultural economy. Commenting on the "drift to the cities," *Wallaces' Farmer* in September 1920 stated that "Men will stay on the farms just so long as farming is a profitable business." Earlier the same year the *Homestead's* publisher James Pierce wrote, "There is an old saying to the effect that money talks, and I believe it is the only argument that will overcome the attractions of city life." Evidence that the Pierces and Wallaces were not alone in this attitude appeared in the September 1926 issue of the *Iowa Farm Bureau Messenger* in a speech delivered by Mrs. Charles W. Sewell, Director of Women's Work of the American Farm Bureau Federation. On Farm Bureau Day

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<sup>4</sup>John T. Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), 239.

at the Iowa State Fair, Sewell declared that agriculture was "far from being in a pleasing and profitable condition." The unfortunate result of this state of affairs was that too many of the country's "cultured educated young people" were in danger of being driven to towns and cities.<sup>5</sup>

Rural folk continued to value farming as a distinctive way of life throughout the 1920s, but most had come to regard farming as a business as well. According to historian Clifford B. Anderson, agrarianism had at one time consisted of three basic tenets: 1) agriculture was the most important vocation because it supplied the nation's basic needs for food and clothing and because it was the fundamental source of wealth; 2) farming was primarily a way of life, not "a mercenary occupation," and therefore superior to all other vocations; 3) since farm folks were the most virtuous of citizens, the United States should remain "a nation of small yeomen proprietors in order to avoid national decline."<sup>6</sup> Anderson argued, however,

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<sup>5</sup>"The Drift to the Cities," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (3 September 1920): 2066; James Pierce, "Increased Profits Would Draw Men Back to Farms," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (22 April 1920): 1462; "'Woman Upholds Farm Morale,'" *Iowa Farm Bureau Messenger* 3 (September 1926): 4. See "The Farm People We Want," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (16 September 1927): 1181.

<sup>6</sup>Clifford B. Anderson, "The Metamorphosis of American Agrarian Idealism in the 1920's and 1930's," *Agricultural History* 35 (October 1961): 182. Joyce Appleby refutes the notion that agrarianism in the Jeffersonian tradition is anti-commercial. Joyce Appleby, "Commercial Farming and the 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic," *Journal of American History* 68 (March 1982), 833-49. Gilbert Fite defines agrarianism or agricultural

that by the 1920s farmers had begun to think of farming less as a way of life and more as a business. Farmers, of course, had been motivated by many of the same things that motivated businessmen long before 1920. They had rushed off to all corners of the continent seeking untapped wealth--speculating in land and exploiting the soil in hopes of quick riches. What changed by 1920 was that farmers were more consciously aware of their roles as businessmen and approached their vocation as such more deliberately than ever before. The argument that agriculture was fundamental to the nation's well being because it fed and clothed people had begun to give way "to the economic argument that agriculture was important because of its purchasing power." Consequently, the conviction that farmers were "morally superior to townsmen was being challenged by the idea that the farmer was simply another businessman or laborer striving to make money."<sup>7</sup>

This change did not cause agriculturists to give up their agrarian ideals or to throw away the notion that farming was a superior calling. Although they were abandoning the notion that farmers were more moral or virtuous because they were not

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fundamentalism as the belief that "farm life produced better people and that citizens close to the soil were more democratic, honest, independent, virtuous, self-reliant, and politically stable than were city dwellers." He does not indicate that the agrarian ideal ever discouraged farmers from being market-oriented. Fite, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Kirschner, *City and Country*, 64-5. Anderson, "American Agrarian Idealism," 188.



profit-minded, many agrarians still emphasized the social, political, spiritual, or, in some cases, racial supremacy of the rural citizenry. Because of this shift in agrarian idealism, those who adhered to an outdated strain of agrarianism which advised farmers to content themselves without profits risked alienating and angering rural audiences. A number of Iowans feared this brand of agrarianism threatened to reduce American farmers to a "peasant class." The angry reaction this type of "agrarian ideal" generated was captured in the June 1926 issue of the *Iowa Farm Bureau Messenger*. In this issue, the *Messenger* railed at the insinuation that American farmers should be satisfied to farm without making a profit. The *Messenger* denied that farm residents could "secure comforts and dignity for a farm home which [could] help to develop self-respect" without money. The *Messenger* closed with the bitter observation that sociologist "Dr. Galpin's research for the U.S.D.A. on European peasantry . . . [was] timely after all," suggesting that if those types of attitudes prevailed the United States might be well on its way to developing its own peasantry.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in a letter to *Wallaces' Farmer*, M. P. Lassen of Audubon County complained about farm advisors who preached

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<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of C. J. Galpin's career the development of rural sociology see Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 109-21. "European Peasantry Study May Be Timely After All," *Iowa Farm Bureau Messenger* 3 (June 1926): 2.

frugality to rural folk. "It is useless," wrote Lassen, "for anybody to try to convince people that farmers should live as the pioneers did seventy-five years ago, and that at the same time all other people should live in pleasure and luxury and have all the comforts." According to Lassen, farmers would not stand for this kind of treatment, unless they were "forced to be slaves under industrial bosses with a whip in their hands. . . ."

*Wallaces' Farmer* warned readers that farm families were not content knowing that they were better off than their grandparents because they believed that while their own standard of living had improved only 10 or 20 percent, the standard of living of urban residents had improved as much as 100 or 200 percent. Faced by this degree of inequity, farmers had a right to suspect that they were closer to a peasant's existence than American farmers ever had been. The farmer, according to *Wallaces'*, had "progressed absolutely but lost ground relatively." In the past, rural midwesterners had worked to buy pianos, photographs, furnaces, and college educations, but the refusal of urbanites and the federal government to ensure that farmers would get a large enough share of the national income to purchase these items--by opposing the McNary-Haugen bill, for instance--seemed to suggest that farmers should live as their grandparents had, "cultivate the spiritual side of life, enjoy nature," and be happy peasants.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>In 1923 *Wallaces'* complained that the farmer's dollar purchased only

*Wallaces' Farmer* cautioned manufacturers to pay attention to farm relief because if the farm community was transformed into a peasant class able to subsist but not to purchase, industry would lose an important market. *Wallaces'* also urged farmers to avoid "peasant thinking," warning that "Farmers who . . . declare that co-operation is no use, that legislation is no use, and that the cards are bound to be stacked against them forever, are doing more than the avowed enemies of agriculture to keep farm incomes low." *Wallaces'* instructed farmers not to pay attention to people who attributed the farm problem to extravagance. Editorials insisted that farmers, as a whole, were not "living too high." *Wallaces'* refused to "put on a drive for a return to pioneer methods," explaining that farmers had committed themselves to modern modes of farming and living even though they demanded a lot of money. According to *Wallaces'*, farmers were "going to buy automobiles, two-row cultivators . . . mineral mixtures and protein supplements," and because their relatives in town had household conveniences,

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about 80 cents worth of city products. "The Next Depression," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (20 April 1923): 619. "Too Much Advice," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (14 October 1927): 1324; "Standards of Living," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (27 June 1924): 919; "Happy Peasants Versus Citizens of the United States," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (10 August 1928): 1096. See "Farm Living Standards," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 49 (1 February 1924): 169; "Export Plan Needed," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (15 January 1926): 72; "Farm Living Standards," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (15 January 1926): 72.

farmers would also strive to obtain "radios, bath-tubs, furnaces and electric lights."<sup>10</sup>

*The Iowa Homestead* took issue with its competitor, presenting a more optimistic view of the rural situation. The *Homestead* refused to accept the argument that American agriculture was headed "direct for peasantry" and insisted that the American farmer was "tremendously farther from . . . peasantry than he ever was"--asserting that "every 25-year period in the history of the United States" found the farmer "farther away from . . . eking out a bare subsistence. . . ." Because the *Homestead* believed American farmers were intelligent and progressive, its publishers thought it premature to condemn farm families to a position of subjection. The *Homestead's* basic point, however, differed little from Wallaces'. The *Homestead* argued that farmers, like other Americans, were entitled to improve their standard of living. The farmer, it contended, "wants his automobile, his radio, his modern home, his amusements, and . . . he is going to have them."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Henry A. Wallace, "Odds and Ends," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (13 January 1928): 45; "Peasant Thinking," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (13 April 1928): 589. See "A Place for Agriculture," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (12 February 1926): 218; "Support from Business Men," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (4 November 1927): 1420; "For Better Living," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (2 November 1928): 1500; "Too Extravagant!" *Wallaces' Farmer* 54 (1 February 1929): 158.

<sup>11</sup>"Time for Agriculture to Look Forward, Not Backward," *The Iowa Homestead* 71 (23 September 1926): 1382; "American Farmers Have Left Peasantry for Good," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (23 June 1927): 1051, 1056.

Clearly, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* shared the conviction that farm families must never become second class citizens and advocated legislative and cooperative action to help ensure that they would not be reduced to peasant status. However, neither publication was habitually strident or pessimistic. Both tended to portray a rather ambivalent attitude concerning the drift to the cities. They attempted--on the surface, at least--to address the topic realistically and logically. These attempts often resulted in a certain nonchalance concerning the rural exodus. On the other hand, despite consistent efforts to subordinate agrarian sentiment to rational analysis, editorials and articles frequently betrayed an underlying antipathy toward the exodus.

*The Iowa Homestead* often addressed the movement from country to city from a national point of view. In other words, it tried to determine the effect of a declining rural population on the United States as a whole. Evaluating the drift to the cities from this perspective, the *Homestead* usually deemed the movement harmless. The nation, it explained, needed more industrial workers in order to meet demands for more manufactured goods; meanwhile, the nation's shrinking agricultural population was still able to produce a more than adequate supply of agricultural products. In February 1921 the *Homestead* reported that Iowa's urbanites represented 36.4 percent of the state's population, an increase over the 30.6

percent reported in 1910. The article hastened to add that the *Homestead* did not "regard this relative decrease in rural as compared with urban population as a serious matter. . . ." The nation, it assured readers, still produced a surplus of agricultural goods and would continue to do so for many years despite a declining rural population--"provided," of course, that "farm products [brought] prices sufficient to enable the farmer to compete in the labor market with industrial and commercial concerns and make a reasonable profit for himself."<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, a *Homestead* article published in March 1925 noted that in 1820, 87 percent of U.S. workers were employed in agriculture; by 1920 that percentage had decreased to 26 percent. Between 1910 and 1920, the reduction of agricultural workers "was much more rapid than during the first 90 years" of the decline. The *Homestead* asserted that this trend was a "natural result of the improvement gradually taking place in our farm machinery and the growing demand for men in industrial and commercial lines." The bottom line was that the United States was in no danger of producing too little food. The drift to the cities would be cause for alarm only if it proved to be selective--"that is, if the best and brightest of our young people gradually were drawn from the farm to the city and only the less capable were left to till the soil." The *Homestead*

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<sup>12</sup>"Rural and Urban Population," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (10 February 1921): 348.

assured readers that this was not occurring. The less efficient (or "marginal") farmers were the ones being driven from the land--not the smartest and most productive. The *Homestead* maintained that the progressive spirit among farmers would grow; not only would the agricultural educational system--including colleges, experiment stations, extension departments and the agricultural press--retain the "wide-awake, alert young men on our farms," but agriculture would become more profitable in the future and "thus make life on the farm more desirable." The *Homestead* held out hope that "the present cooperative movement, in many respects still imperfect, [would] grow in size and importance and give the farmer greater control over his products."<sup>13</sup>

Rather than agonizing over agriculture's losses, the *Homestead* suggested that the farming community focus on striving for a better future. Perennially throughout the 1920s *The Iowa Homestead* pinned its hopes for a bright agricultural future on scientific progress and cooperative action. In keeping with its faith in the inevitability of progress, the *Homestead* routinely described the drift from the cities as a perfectly natural--even potentially beneficial--trend. In January 1926 the *Homestead* suggested that agriculture in Iowa had suffered from too few rather than too many cities and reminded readers that shrinking

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<sup>13</sup>"The Country to City Movement," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (19 March 1925): 452.

numbers of rural residents had not been accompanied by a decrease in production since a smaller number of farmers were able to till more acres and produce more food as a result of improved farming methods.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the *Homestead's* consistent claim that the drift to the cities was no cause for alarm, the periodical frequently revealed biases against the trend. For example, a January 1924 issue urged Iowans to think long and hard before leaving their farms. The *Homestead* acknowledged that it was natural to resent poor agricultural conditions and aspire to the luxuries and conveniences of the city. Nevertheless, it expressed great concern that "a goodly number of our best farm boys continue in the work which their fathers have honored." It was crucial, the *Homestead* believed, "to hold on the farm those who by tastes, training, and understanding [seemed] to belong there." In March of the same year *The Iowa Homestead* stated that the "big drift to towns and cities" was "one of the worst results of the agricultural depression through which the country [had] been passing." But the *Homestead* thought that the worst of both the depression and the drift was over. "Slowly, but surely, many of these rural folk who went to the cities to share in the good times" were realizing that those times were "'too good to last.'" The *Homestead* believed many of these people were ready

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<sup>14</sup>"Increased City Populations Will Benefit Iowa Farmers," *The Iowa Homestead* 73 (28 January 1926): 134.



to return to the farm, contending that "in the natural trend of things" conditions in the country were going to improve "while the reverse [might] be true of the city."<sup>15</sup>

What, however, was "a young man without funds, and with a wife who [knew] absolutely nothing about the farm, and who would perhaps turn up her nose at mention of going there" to do? Regardless of the realization that he might be better off on the farm, a young man in this situation was essentially stuck in the city. According to *The Iowa Homestead*, even older, more experienced men were caught in this trap. Farmers and their families who moved to the city "despite the fact that they were not trained for any trade or profession, got along well while everything was booming;" but, in time, many of these men lacked steady employment due to the "vagaries" of the industrial market and yearned to return to the country. The *Homestead* believed farm-trained women also were ready to go back. The great obstacle was that there were "no funds to take these folks to the farm." The *Homestead* called these conditions chaotic; it feared that the population shift which began with World War I might deprive the nation's farms of "the touch and influence of those who love the land, who are farmers by nature and at heart." The *Iowa Homestead* also worried that urbanites did not appreciate the loss that would occur if farms should be reduced

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<sup>15</sup>Dante Pierce, "Hesitate Before Leaving the Farm," *The Iowa Homestead*, 3 January 1924, 3, 6; "The Problem of the Farmer Who Moves to Town," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (20 March 1924): 510.

to food factories, ceasing to be "the citadels of citizenship . . . and of Americanism."<sup>16</sup>

The theme that conditions in the country were bound to improve while boom times in the city were not likely to last became increasingly common in *The Iowa Homestead* throughout the latter 1920s, and the periodical increasingly held out hope that the trend toward urbanization was slowing--or even reversing. As early as 1920, in response to initial reports from the fourteenth census, James Pierce explained that an expanding urban population was a natural result of industrialization and a growing desire for amenities. "I, for one," Pierce admitted, "would not care to go back to pioneer living, nor do I believe it would appeal to many. But it is well to recognize that someone must make all the handy conveniences which we have come to look upon as necessities, and as long as they are in demand, the city will call for industrial workers." Ultimately, however, Pierce believed that food would "prove more important than luxuries." He predicted that farm labor would become scarce as a result of rising industrial wages and shortening work days. The labor shortage would inevitably cause a decrease in agricultural production. When that happened the drift to the cities would have to end, and the economic pendulum would swing in favor of the country again--reversing the pattern of

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<sup>16</sup>"The Problem of the Farmer Who Moves to Town," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (20 March 1924): 510.

migration. "It will be a good day for the country," Pierce claimed, "for the preservation of its highest ideals of domestic virtue and public welfare," when that time came.<sup>17</sup>

But with increasing farm mechanization, commercial fertilizer, and biotechnology after World War I, the decrease in agricultural production never came, and *The Iowa Homestead* altered its predictions. Nevertheless, James Pierce's son and successor, Dante Pierce, continued to think optimistically about the future of rural Iowa. He placed a great deal of confidence in the hope that an improved standard of living in the country would make farming attractive to the younger generation.

"Despite complaints which are sometimes heard, the farm in Iowa is yearly becoming a better place upon which to live. Modern conveniences are spreading fast into rural districts which were once held to be city luxuries. Farm water systems, electric lights, the automobile, the radio, better roads, the substitution of power for manual labor, are all doing their share to make rural life more enjoyable." According to Pierce, "The good old days in agriculture which [were] mourned by some were days of privation and bitter, hard labor." He called it "an excellent thing for Iowa" that boys and girls had begun to "expect and demand the good things of life." Those who remained

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<sup>17</sup>James Pierce, "City Dwellers Now Outnumber Rural Population," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (25 March 1920): 1216. See James Pierce, "A Coming Decrease in Production," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (15 April 1920): 1380.

on the farm would not be content without these things and they had the ability to obtain them.<sup>18</sup>

*The Homestead* believed that improving conditions in the country were bound to challenge the attractions of the city and cited studies conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture as proof. For instance, in March of 1928, it reported that, according to the USDA, movement from farms to cities continued but at a less rapid rate than in preceding years. Moreover, migration from cities to farms had increased from 1925 to 1928. *The Homestead* attributed the net decrease in the cityward movement to "improved agricultural conditions, the disillusionment of those who sought better economic conditions in cities and who [were] now returning to farms, and the slight slackening of industrial employment."<sup>19</sup>

In July 1928 *The Iowa Homestead* republished USDA sociologist C. J. Galpin's summary of survey responses from 1,167 farmers who had left cities, towns, or villages for the country sometime between 1924 and 1927. Galpin wrote a summary statement as if it were the response of an elected spokesman from the group. His fictional farmer spokesman asserted that "'The main inducement which won us back to farming were the basic advantages of the farm for health and living conditions,

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<sup>18</sup>Dante Pierce, "Young People Still Find Iowa Farming Attractive," *The Iowa Homestead* 71 (7 January 1926): 6.

<sup>19</sup>"Movement from Farms Slower," *The Iowa Homestead* 73 (15 March 1928): 525.

especially for our children. We highly valued the closeness of nature and spacious character of country life.'" Evidently monetary concerns also played a role in the decision to return to the farm. Galpin's fictional spokesman commented that "Some of us who are hired men found out to our sorrow that the cost of living in cities ate up all our wages; and that we could really do better on the farm and save more money. A considerable number of us owners and tenants feel the same. . . . The fact is that, more or less, we all got tired of city life; and it is no small advantage to us that we can live on the farm an independent life.'" Galpin concluded that the disillusionment experienced by the farmers who responded led him to believe that some farmers who left for the city at the same time those surveyed returned to the farm would "in turn pay for their experience with unfulfilled expectations and disappointment and later turn their backs upon city life." At the end of the article, the *Homestead* remarked that perhaps some of the hopes expressed by Galpin's representative new farmer were overly optimistic, but that the investigation had demonstrated that city life was not all it was held out to be and that farm life still held attractions for men and women who had experienced both farm and city life.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>"Farm Life Proves Attractive to Many City Dwellers," *The Iowa Homestead* 73 (26 July 1928): 1155.

After several years of predicting that the tides would turn eventually, one suspects that *The Iowa Homestead* was happy to announce that the movement from the city to the farm was "on the increase, and [was] almost equaling the shift from the farm." This satisfaction was short lived, however; in the spring of 1929--less than a year later--the *Homestead* informed readers that the nation's farm population was the smallest it had been in 20 years. In fact, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics estimated it to be approximately 188,000 less than it had been in 1928. *The Iowa Homestead* reported that while "movement away from farms slowed up somewhat during the year as compared with immediately preceding years, . . . movement from cities to farms was also smaller."<sup>21</sup>

Like *The Iowa Homestead*, *Wallaces' Farmer* failed to maintain a consistent stance toward the rapid urban growth and rural decline taking place during the 1920s. *Wallaces'* approach to the situation differed from the *Homestead's*, however, in at least one very substantial way. Both Henry C. and Henry A. Wallace committed themselves and their paper in support of the McNary-Haugen proposal. Since this periodical threw so much support behind a scheme designed to eliminate some of the economic reasons for the drift to the cities, it is reasonable to suspect that *Wallaces' Farmer* kept up a vigorous campaign for

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.; "Farm Population Now Smallest in 20 Years," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (28 March 1929): 590.

an immediate halt to the rural exodus. This, however, was not the case. *Wallaces'*, like *The Iowa Homestead* which opposed the McNary-Haugen plan, tended to view the movement as a rational response to long-term trends. Given the rivalries and differing philosophies of the two papers, what proves most surprising about the ways in which *The Iowa Homestead* and *Wallaces' Farmer* addressed the drift to the cities <sup>is</sup> are not the differences but the similarities.

In response to the results of the 1920 census *Wallaces' Farmer* insisted that the movement from country to city had nothing to do with "the moral stamina of the rural population" but was a natural result of the high wages offered by city factories. Like the *Homestead*, *Wallaces' Farmer* acknowledged the economic realities which were changing rural America. According to a February 1922 issue, "The high prices and the patriotic call of the war brought into activity hundreds of thousands of men and millions of acres" which were no longer needed. *Wallaces'* recognized that "Pushing these marginal men and these marginal acres back into oblivion" would arouse a fearful protest. While acknowledging that the adjustment was painful, *Wallaces'* suggested that the end result would be that "the prices of farm products and of city products [would] again be on a parity." A May 1922 issue advised farmers not to fear their decline in population and voting power since a smaller group of farmers could become more successful in achieving

economic power through organization than could a larger group. In fact, in October of 1922, *Wallaces' Farmer* noted that, whereas the rural reformers of the previous two decades had devised schemes for holding "country boys and girls on the farm" and even for attracting city people to the country, it seemed more prudent under current agricultural conditions "to send those of our boys who are not peculiarly adapted to farming into the cities in order to create the competition necessary to bring city products down to a parity with farm products. . . ." There was no point, according to *Wallaces'*, in "holding the less efficient, more ignorant type of farmer on the land."<sup>22</sup>

However, *Wallaces' Farmer* (again, like the *Homestead*) frequently warned those considering a move to the city that good times and good pay would not last. Editorials predicted that a period of depression would descend upon the manufacturing industry throwing hundreds of thousands of city men out of work. When this happened, unskilled farm boys would suffer first and would wish they had "stayed by the farm." Men who enjoyed

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<sup>22</sup>From 1920 to 1929, Iowa's rural population decreased by 2.4 percent, declining from 1.529 to 1.49 million. During this period Iowa's urban population grew by 11.9 percent, increasing from 875,000 to 979,000. United States Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1940* (Washington, D. C.: GPO, 1943), v. 2, Population, 847. "The Drift to the Cities," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (3 September 1920): 2066; "Babson and the Farmer," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (17 February 1922): 212; "The Farmers' Loss in Voting Power," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (12 May 1922): 606; "'Back to Town,'" *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (18 October 1922): 1188.



country life ought to continue farming despite hard times, *Wallaces' Farmer* counseled. Men who were not "fitted for farming" should seek other occupations, but most farmers would be making a serious mistake by quitting since they would probably have to do so at a financial loss.<sup>23</sup>

*Wallaces' Farmer* published the message that better times were on the way for the farmer who persevered. Prosperity had to be just around the corner--especially since so many producers had already given up and gone to the city. A "bright day for agriculture is coming," the paper promised. "The only question is as to whether the coming will be hastened by intelligent organized action, or whether it will be necessary to await the slow grinding of the blind, economic forces, obtaining readjustments by bankrupting and driving to the cities those less efficient men who are least interested in farming, or who have made unfortunate mistakes in financial judgment . . . . Now is no time for the really good farmer to quit."<sup>24</sup>

In 1924 Henry A. Wallace noted that Iowa's cities had increased in population by 820,000 since 1885 while Iowa's farm population had decreased by 200,000. He explained that

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<sup>23</sup>"A Word to Young Farmers," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (7 May 1920): 1299. See "Stay By the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (11 March 1921): 465.

<sup>24</sup>"The Substantial Farmers of 1950," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (15 February 1921): 252; "Stay By the Ship," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (25 November 1921): 1420; "The Bright Time Coming," *Wallaces' Farmer*, 48 (23 September 1923): 1280.

southeastern Iowa counties had suffered most due to competition from the rapidly developing northwestern corner of the state--a pattern similar to the one that developed nationally during the 1870s as agricultural production in the United States rapidly expanded westward and left farmers in the northeastern portion of the country struggling to compete. Wallace acknowledged that the 980,000 people on Iowa farms produced more in the 1920s than 1.2 million Iowa farmers had in the 1890s because of more efficient machinery, finer livestock, and higher-yielding strains of crops. He also acknowledged that fewer people on the farms and more people in the cities could be beneficial if the price of city-manufactured goods was high and the price of farm products ruinously low. He cautioned, however, that there was serious danger, if the drift to the cities persisted at the same rate, because rapidly expanding urban populations would begin to lose sympathy for farmers after being away from the country for more than a generation--implying that the urban masses might one day refuse to pay any attention to the farmers' plight.

Wallace believed that such a situation would be "full of peril, once the prices of food [began] to soar," as he believed they inevitably would. Wallace understood that increased efficiency allowed fewer farmers to meet American demands in the '20s than had been required before the turn of the century, but he doubted that Iowa farmers would become more efficient in the next thirty years than they had since 1890. Even if each farm family became

efficient enough to produce food for six city families, *Wallaces'* warned that a civilization dependent upon such an arrangement might not last for more than a few hundred years due to the danger that serious blunders would be made in handling food problems. This, of course, was *Wallaces'* standard pattern of argument; some movement from country to city was to be accepted without alarm, but danger lay ahead if the trend continued indefinitely.<sup>25</sup>

As the fight for the McNary-Haugen bill became increasingly desperate and bitter, *Wallaces' Farmer* sometimes deviated from its usual approach--becoming somewhat less accomodating of and more willing to question current trends. In April 1926 *Wallaces'* told readers, "Apparently we are approaching a time when the farm is going to be a business instead of a family institution. We are a long way from that point yet, but apparently we are steadily driving in that direction. . . . We don't feel greatly alarmed about the situation as revealed by the census figures. We do wonder, however, just what kind of a civilization we are tending toward." Obviously, *Wallaces'* was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the changes taking

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<sup>25</sup>Henry A. Wallace, "Ebbing Tide of Farm Population," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (28 March 1924): 501; "The Decline in Farm Population," *Wallaces' Farmer* 54 (19 April 1929): 616. Since Wallace was himself so involved in the development of and popularization of hybrid corn, it is ironic that he did not seem to foresee the incredible effect that biotechnological developments would have on production capabilities.

place. "How big a population can we maintain in the cities of Iowa?" the publication questioned. "How far can we go in the direction of making farms merely places where men work efficiently rather than homes for families?" Two years later *Wallaces' Farmer* printed a Drake professor's conservative plan for corporate agriculture but commented that corporate farming had not been proven efficient. *Wallaces'* opposed corporate farming as socially undesirable even if it did turn out to be a more efficient route to agricultural production than the family farm. "We need the family farm; we need the social qualities it generates. Love of the land is something too precious in the life of a farmer, and in the long life of a nation, to be traded for stock in a corporation firm." In July of that same year, *Wallaces'* further elucidated its position on the issue, stating that "the fight for agricultural equality, as expressed in the McNary-Haugen bill, [centered] around the problem of maintaining the family sized farm while at the same time getting some of the centralized bargaining advantages which business [enjoyed] thru [sic] the corporate form of organization."<sup>26</sup>

About the time *Wallaces' Farmer* began to express concern about the future of the family farm it also began to evaluate

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<sup>26</sup>"People on Iowa Farms and in Iowa Towns," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (16 April 1926): 591; "Do We Need Corporation Farming," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (9 March 1928): 376; "The Family Versus the Corporation," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (13 July 1928): 1008. See "The New Era in Farming," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (12 June 1925): 816.

the merits of identifying its interests only with the so-called most efficient farmers. Like *The Iowa Homestead*, *Wallaces'* had accepted the idea that economic conditions demanded the elimination of some producers. Naturally, both periodicals hoped that only marginal farmers would be driven out of the vocation. Nevertheless, in November of 1925 *Wallaces'* queried its readers to find out if they wanted the paper to devote more of its time trying to enable "'more efficient farmers to survive, or more of it to the problem of organizing the mass of farmers to get justice.'" Responses to this question appeared in January of 1926 requesting that *Wallaces'* commit itself to helping farmers as a whole to secure economic justice--perhaps through political and economic organization. One subscriber argued that "'The fittest that survive under the conditions of the 'claw and fang' struggle are not of the type that make for the advancement of civilization and progress toward the higher things of life.'"<sup>27</sup>

The year 1926 proved to be something of a turning point for *Wallaces' Farmer*. Under the leadership of Henry A. Wallace, the periodical devoted a great deal of effort to determining what kind of civilization would best suit rural Iowans and to helping its readers pursue it. *The Iowa Homestead*, though in a less self-conscious manner, also attempted to help rural Iowans

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<sup>27</sup>"Farm Living Standards," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (15 January 1926): 72. See "From a Farm-Hand," 51 (15 January 1926): 72; "Hit Harder," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (15 January 1926): 72.

define and obtain an ideal civilization. Although both periodicals appeared ambivalent toward the drift to the cities throughout the 1920s--condoning it as necessary and unavoidable on the one hand and condemning it as dangerous on the other--neither was willing to cast the future of rural Iowa to the wind. *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* advised their readers not to be alarmed by the movement from country to city, suggesting that increased urbanization was inevitable and perhaps even desirable. They did not recommend removal to the city to their own readers, whom they considered intelligent and efficient farm families who loved the land and life in the country. Rather they prescribed to these readers a program of action which they believed would allow rural Iowans to face the future on their own terms.

CHAPTER THREE:  
VISIONS OF RURAL CIVILIZATION

Throughout the 1920s *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* pondered the future of American civilization. In 1925 *Wallaces'* asserted that two conceptions of civilization were fighting for recognition in the United States. One view placed a premium on maximum growth of America's commercial and industrial centers. The other insisted that the country should not sacrifice its "home agriculture" to the building of cities. Agriculturists feared that industrialists wished to import vast quantities of cheap imported food from Argentina and other developing nations at the expense of American farmers. *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* worked to portray thriving agriculturists as vital to the country's well-being and lobbied for farmers' share of the national prosperity. Both applauded farm families' demands for agricultural profits and affirmed their right to take part in American consumerism. At the same time, however, both publications assumed that rural people did not wish to embrace the ascendant urban mass culture without reservation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Where Are We Going?," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (6 March 1925): 334; "A New Farmer for A New Age," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (30 October 1925): 1420. See "How Much Further Shall We Go?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (28 November 1924): 1532; "Creating a Rural civilization," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (4 September 1925): 1123.

*Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* believed Iowa's rural population could share in urban-industrial prosperity without sacrificing its rural identity or rural values. In fact, agricultural prosperity could lead to a rural renaissance in which rural communities and culture would thrive as never before--culminating in the creation of a "distinctive rural civilization." The publishers of *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* did not collaborate to design or promote an elaborate, all-encompassing blueprint for rural civilization, but the visions both periodicals adhered to and the ways in which they promoted them through editorials, columns, feature articles, and contests had much in common. Both offered visions of a "new type of rural community" which--by building its own meeting places, establishing recreational facilities, organizing athletic teams, putting on plays and debates, hosting farm institutes and demonstrations, supporting cooperative buying and selling institutions, and performing other vital functions--would prevent urban-industrial goods such as improved roads, cars, and telephones from destroying rural community life. This "new rural community" would provide the basis for a rural civilization to rival the civilization of the great city."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Mary Neth's chapter "Reorganizing the Rural Community" treats many of the themes discussed in this chapter but assumes that those who advocated changes in rural society were committed to "rurbanizing" or urbanizing the countryside. Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 122-46.



Country Lifiers had introduced the concept of rural civilization during the first two decades of the twentieth century, but it is unclear whether the term as it was employed by *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* during the 1920s implied the same thing to rural Iowans that it had in earlier years. If the Country Life Movement, as David Danbom's analysis suggests, was perceived by many rural people as intrusive and snobbish, the term may have been regarded by some as a subtle put down--intimating that rural life was backward, crude, or needy. Whatever the case, by 1920 *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* were able to invoke the concept of rural civilization as a term that embodied hope for rural Iowa's future and celebrated rural distinctiveness.<sup>3</sup>

Neither *Wallaces'* nor the *Homestead* published a concise, decisive definition of rural civilization. Indeed, while this concept was frequently implied by the *Homestead*, the term was used only rarely. *Wallaces'* made direct reference to the concept more regularly but not, as a rule, more precisely. In general, rural civilization implied a healthful, wholesome alternative to urban civilization while offering conveniences, amenities, and opportunities for economic satisfaction, intellectual growth, cultural achievement, and social interaction comparable to (if different from) those available in

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<sup>3</sup>Country Life Commission, *Report of the Country Life Commission*, in *Agriculture in the United States: A Documentary History*, v. 2, ed. Wayne D. Rasmussen (New York: Random House, 1975), 1863-4, 1868-70.

urban settings. Concerns that had dominated the Country Life agenda--including issues related to rural cooperation, rural women and children, and rural culture--continued to influence the character of the rural civilization ideal throughout the 1920s.

The concept of rural civilization cannot be dismissed as a nostalgic ideal which urged a return to the good old days. There were instances, of course, in which *Wallaces'* or the *Homestead* romanticized some aspect of the past, but nostalgia was not a primary feature of rural civilization. Rural dissatisfaction, a product of rising expectations in the midst of declining opportunities, was widespread. Farm families repeatedly expressed great frustration with those who suggested that they should return to the lifestyles of their parents or grandparents--contenting themselves, more or less, with subsistence. Under these circumstances, farm periodicals would have been foolish to promote a rural ideal that derived most of its inspiration from happy days-gone-by. The concept of rural civilization featured in both publications emphasized the need for creation rather than preservation.

Instead of exalting the pioneer past, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* criticized many of its assumptions and practices. While neither publication reviled all aspects of America's pioneer heritage, more often than not, they presented the pioneer way as a foil of the future--not as a pattern for it. By all accounts, the pioneer era in Iowa agriculture was

over; therefore *Wallaces' Farmer* and the *Homestead* urged their readers to give up pioneer habits and values. Pioneers had too often regarded land carelessly and treated it as a speculative investment. Not everyone expected to get rich quick, but many people had acted on the principle that they and their heirs could live quite comfortably if they accumulated as much--or more--land than they could afford. As land values sky-rocketed, they planned to sell what they did not need for sizable profits. *Wallaces' Farmer*, in particular, encouraged readers to abandon this perspective. Twentieth-century circumstances and values dictated that land was no longer something to be bought up only to be farmed haphazardly or incidentally until it could be sold. Modern agriculturists farmed land intensively and efficiently, improved its soil, and cared for it in such a way that it would provide a generous living for generations to come. Land was no longer to be viewed as just a long-term investment; modern family farms were to be prized as permanent homes. *Wallaces'* referred to this enlightened attitude as "the building ideal" and mandated renewed vision, creative effort, and unswerving commitment to the land as requirements for rural civilization.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>"Building a Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (7 August 1925): 1010. See "Farm Land Values," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (7 January 1921): 5; Henry C. Wallace, "A Christmas Message," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (8 December 1922): 1445; "For Better Farm Living," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (1 May 1925): 612; W. S. Hovey, "The Standard of Living on the Farm," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (5 November 1925): 1571.

According to *Wallaces'*, a farm family with the building ideal would work year after year not only to make its farm more profitable but also to create a place "far more desirable than any place in town." This required giving up the pioneer habit of doing without comforts and amenities. *Wallaces' Farmer's* ideal farm family was medium-sized, lived on medium-priced land, enjoyed "all the comforts of life," and refused "to numb both body and soul by overworking and scrimping." *Wallaces'* advised farmers not to compete with each other to purchase high-priced land, saddling their families with a burden of debt and precluding them from having "the good things of life" such as automobiles, radios, electric lights, and running water. If rural Iowans would begin treating their land as a home to be cherished and constantly improved, *Wallaces'* predicted that within forty years Iowa could be made "into a veritable Garden of the Lord"--a landscape of permanent and comfortable farm homes, convenient and attractive barns and outbuildings, good orchards, gardens, and shade trees. To this end, *Wallaces' Farmer* and, particularly, *The Iowa Homestead*, campaigned for rural home beautification through articles on farm home aesthetics and farmstead improvement contests. According to the *Homestead*, the pioneers who settled Iowa's virgin prairies built mere shelters for homes--designed just to keep the farm's "business personnel in such physical condition as to enable it to operate the business." Their children and grandchildren had made due with the same type of inconvenient, unattractive

housing. These substandard facilities were no longer appropriate. Iowa's pioneer stage had passed, and the modern farm family was more than a labor unit. *The Homestead*, therefore, encouraged readers to become pioneers of a new breed--who, by leading the way in creating more beautiful and comfortable farm homes, would bring about "higher mental development, a higher standard of living and a more prosperous and contented rural group."<sup>5</sup>

If building a rural civilization required abandoning certain pioneer attitudes toward land and lifestyle, it also demanded willingness to sacrifice the pioneer ideals of independence and individualism. Insisting that agricultural prosperity was prerequisite for rural civilization, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* constantly championed the cause of

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"Building a Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (7 August 1925): 1010; "Making Farming Worth While," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (3 April 1925): 500; "Farm Home Beauty Demands a Hearing," *The Iowa Homestead*, 73 (27 December 1928): 1956-7. See "What's the Matter with Iowa?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (24 December 1920): 2829; "Farmer or Real Estate Man?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (19 June 1925): 848; Charles D. Kirkpatrick, "The Story of an Iowa Farm Home," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (18 December 1925): 1661; "A Well-Planned Iowa Farmstead," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (28 October 1920): 2989, 3002; "Where Home Comforts Are Considered," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (30 December 1920): , 3405, 3417; "Campaign for Better Rural Homes," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (10 January 1929): 50; "Prizes for Improved Farm Homes," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (24 January 1929): 138; "More Information About Our Contest," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (31 January 1929): 173; "Object Lesson in Home Transformation," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (28 February 1929): 394; "Beautiful Farm Residence Grounds," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (11 April 1929): 676.

cooperation. Without a solid economic base for agriculture, rural Iowans would continue to abandon the countryside, depleting rural communities of their most important resources and jeopardizing all hope of a satisfactory rural civilization. *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* preached the belief that organization of farmers into cooperative units at local, state, and national levels would secure enormous economic and social benefits--assuring a better standard of living for rural Iowans. Both periodicals pointed to the successes big business and labor had attained through cooperation and urged farmers to join cooperative organizations in order to achieve similar advances for agriculture.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The *Iowa Homestead* reported in 1926 that membership in active cooperative organizations had grown from 65,000 members in 1915 to over two and a half million in 1925. "Growth in Cooperation," *The Iowa Homestead* 71 (12 August 1926): 1168; "The New Frontier," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (3 November 1922): 1293. See A. L. Hitz, "Important Farm Problems," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (18 August 1921): 1459; "The Biggest Business in the World," *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (27 September 1923): 1385, 1406; A. H. Butterfield, "Farmers, Let's Reorganize," *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (27 December 1923): 1971; Jas. Hart, "Questions That Are Difficult to Answer," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (3 April 1924): 609; C. E. Loomer, "What Is the Matter with the Corn Belt Farmer?" *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (26 June 1924): 1085; "Farm Organizations Take Step Ahead," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (21 May 1925): 799, 807; "The Making of a Real Farm Organization," *The Iowa Homestead* 71 (4 February 1926): 173-4; "Counsels of Despair," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (13 July 1923): 982; "Farm Living Standards," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (1 February 1924): 169; "'Let the Good Work Go On,'" *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (22 January 1926): 127; J. W. Martin, "Our Rights," *Wallaces' Farmer* 54 (7 June 1929): 849.

*Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* frequently discussed the advantages and disadvantages of certain types of cooperative efforts--debating whether broadly conceived organizations or smaller, more specific organizations such as commodity associations were more effective. In general, however, both periodicals advanced their campaigns for cooperation by enjoining all farmers and their families to commit themselves to active participation in and unwavering support for at least one cooperative organization of any kind. To this end, editorials and letters to the editor called for the abolishment of pioneer notions of independence and individualism, along with the accordant spirit of cut-throat competition. *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* asked readers to fight for agricultural equality for farmers as a class first and for individual profit second. "The farmer of today can make money," the *Homestead* observed, "but how much more quickly and surely he can accomplish this if he joins hands and works cooperatively with his neighbors and fellow farmers all over the nation." Editorials and articles instructed farmers who wished to better the lives of their own families to embrace cooperation in order to transform the countryside into vital rural communities. According to *The Iowa Homestead*, the true spirit of organization was "exemplified in the man who [joined] hands with other farmers" in order to ensure his family "a just portion of the conveniences and luxuries that [fell] to the lot of others who [contributed] no more to the welfare of the nation than he." Individualism and

competition were long-standing rural traditions, but the papers insisted the time was ripe for rural cooperation. The fruits of modernization, such as automobiles, good roads, and rural delivery, would facilitate farmers' cooperative efforts while the threats posed by organized urban-industrial interests would convince farmers that the best way to defend themselves against oppression was to dedicate themselves to cooperation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>"How to Make Good on the Farm," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (15 January 1920): 192; "Organize to Protect Homes, Schools and Churches," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (27 January 1921): 209. See "Teach It to the Children," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (6 October 1922): 1156; Donald R. Murphy, "What Kind of Farm Organization Do We Need?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (22 June 1923): 907, 915; "The Independent Farmer," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (7 December 1923): 1641; "Laboratories of Democracy," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (14 December 1923): 1672; "Toward a Philosophy of Cooperation," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (8 February 1924): 208-9; "Three Stages in Farming Standards," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (11 February 1927): 206; "For Less Competition Among Farmers," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (26 December 1925): 1699; "Let the Devil Take Him," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (21 May 1926): 755; "The Road to Farm Relief," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (28 January 1927): 131; "The Assets of Co-operation," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (9 September 1927): 1146; Harry C. Johnson, "Why the Farmer Fails," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (23 March 1928): 480; "Cooperative Farming," *Wallaces' Farmer* 54 (9 August 1929): 1091; "The Farmers' Greatest Needs," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (15 January 1920): 196; "Commercial Agriculture," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (13 January 1921): 68; E. L. Vincent, "What Co-operation Has Done for My Business," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (3 February 1921): 316; "Making Co-operation Effective," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (21 July 1921): 1313; "What Cooperation Must Do to Be Saved," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (6 October 1921): 1752; "The Kind of Organization Real Farmers Need," *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (2 August 1923): 3; "Herbert Quick Writes on Co-operative Success," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (10 January 1924): 43; "Two



Despite troubling factions within and among the various cooperative organizations, despite the failures of the past, and despite the inevitability of problems in the future, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* insisted that the only way farmers could hope to ensure they would receive a fair share of American prosperity was to commit themselves to the cooperative movement through active membership in local organizations. Recognizing that their readers were easily disheartened by disputes among and within farm organizations, the periodicals advised that the problems of the cooperative movement were best solved by those who worked in organizations--not by those who gave into despair and left them.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the debate over the McNary-Haugen proposal, *The Iowa Homestead* frequently proffered cooperation as a better long-term solution to farmers' problems than government legislation. *Wallaces' Farmer*, on the other hand, insisted that cooperative action and favorable farm legislation were both necessary if farmers were ever to achieve parity. *Wallaces'*

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Kinds of Farm Organizations Necessary," *The Iowa Homestead* 71 (14 January 1926): 43, 46; Carl Dorr, "History of Agricultural Organizations," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (10 March 1927): 435-6; "Looking Toward an Improved Agriculture," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (1 June 1929): 948; "Increased Importance of Farm Organization Memberships," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (20 July 1929): 1144; "Farm Life Is What We Choose to Make It," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (20 July 1929): 1140.

<sup>8</sup>See "What's the Matter with the Farm Organizations?" *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (29 November 1923): 1787; "A Change Needed in Way of Thinking" *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (20 July 1929): 1140.

argued that truly successful, widespread cooperation could take place only after agriculture became more profitable and stable. Government intervention through the McNary-Haugen plan would give farmers the financial edge they needed in order to organize effectively.<sup>9</sup>

Cooperation, like legislation, consistently failed to produce significant gains in agricultural prosperity throughout the 1920s, but *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* continued to support the cause. Both publications predicted that cooperation would enhance the quality of life in rural communities--socially and culturally as well as economically. Cooperative organizations, according to *Wallaces' Farmer*, should become the organizing forces behind coordinated, community-building programs.

In 1925 *Wallaces'* commended the Franklin Cooperative Creamery Association of Minneapolis for its decision to stop patronage dividends and to put profits in a reserve fund for community use. With these funds, *Wallaces'* reported, a farm had been purchased as a recreation center and an auditorium had been built for educational and recreational activities. Soon thereafter, *Wallaces' Farmer* asked readers to tell about cooperative activities in their "progressive rural

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<sup>9</sup>See "The Biggest Business in the World," *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (27 September 1923): 1385, 1406; "Modern Business Methods in Agriculture," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (1 January 1925): 1; "Government Aid to Co-operative Marketing," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (12 September 1924): 1189; H. A. Wallace, "Out-Guessing the Crowd," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (28 January 1927): 136-7.

neighborhoods." In an attempt to define an ideal cooperative community, *Wallaces'* established a contest in 1926 through which to recognize and reward midwestern communities for superior cooperative achievement. The paper offered \$150 to the winning community and urged readers to form committees in order to survey and submit local accomplishments. According to *Wallaces'* the first signs of the kind of rural civilization it envisioned were "community associations with vigorous local pride, a record of accomplishment and a breadth of sympathy and knowledge sufficient to . . .[prevent] narrow provincialism."

Institutions and activities that earned communities praise included cooperatively managed rural telephone systems, successful cooperative business ventures, well-supported local farm organizations, chatauqua and lyceum circles, community-minded churches, active women's clubs, well-groomed properties, community social affairs and social centers, 4-H clubs, and consolidated schools.<sup>10</sup>

*Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* rejected the traditional pioneer mindset that treated farmland as a temporary investment and regarded farming as a purely competitive venture. In addition, *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* criticized the pioneer tendency to expend profits only to add acres to the farm or to

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<sup>10</sup>"Building the Community," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (4 September 1925): 1124; "The Best Co-operative Community," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (25 December 1925): 1691, 1702; "Where Is the Best Farm Community?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (30 April 1926): 653. See H. C. Grant, "The By-Products of Cooperation," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (30 November 1928): 1635, 1641.

increase the farm's capacity to produce. Increasingly, farmers had spent money to make their work easier and more efficient. They had neglected, however, to invest their money in ways that would make farm life more comfortable and less arduous for their overburdened wives. Following the lead of Country Lifers who had drawn attention to the hardships and dismal conditions faced by females on the farm, *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* pointed out that rural women had rarely received their share of the rewards even when conditions for agriculture were favorable. Farm families typically invested in more land or new agricultural equipment instead of improving the house or the standard of living. This, according to both periodicals, needed to change--and quickly; for it was widely believed that discontented women were a principle force--if not *the* principle force--behind the drift to the cities. Perceiving that life was far more comfortable, convenient, and socially satisfying in towns and cities, women supposedly convinced their husbands and children to abandon the farm at their earliest opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>In 1927 *The Iowa Homestead* reported that the decrease in Iowa farm population was more due to girls and women leaving the farm than to men. According to the 1925 U.S. agricultural census, there were more than 46,000 more males on Iowa farms than females (381,034 males to 335,336 females). "Many More Men Than Women on Iowa Farms," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (25 August 1927): 1287. See Country Life Commission, 1892-3; "Rural Life Conference at the State Fair, *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (24 September 1920): 2254; "What's the Farmer's Wife Worth?" *The Iowa Homestead* 45 (23 November 1920): 3381; "Keeping Mrs. Farmer Contented," *The Iowa Homestead* 46 (25 August 1921): 1493; Harriet Wallace Ashby, "The Farm Woman of Today and Tomorrow,"

Without a stable, contented rural population there could be no thriving rural community; therefore the well-being and life-satisfaction of women was central to the concept of rural civilization in Iowa during the 1920s. Everyone on the farm was affected by the lack of rural conveniences, amenities, and social opportunities, but when rural women compared living and working conditions in their homes and communities to those enjoyed by many urban women, they saw themselves as severely disadvantaged. *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* agreed and argued that comfort and convenience were imperative if modern women were to be truly content in the country. Both periodicals routinely featured editorials, articles, columns, and letters to the editor urging rural families to make home improvement a top priority.<sup>12</sup>

In June of 1920 *The Iowa Homestead's* Home section quoted approvingly from Xenophon Caverno's letter to the *Kansas City Star* insisting that a farmer's wife played a crucial role in the farm's success and should have "her full share of equipment for her work." It was just as foolish, he asserted, for a farm family to do without running water, a kitchen sink, a heating

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*Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (16 February 1923): 267; "Women As Spenders,"

*Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (27 February 1925): 292; Henry A. Wallace, "Odds and Ends," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (16 December 1927): 1644.

<sup>12</sup>See "The Farm Wife's Work," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (3 September 1920): 2074; "What's the Farmer's Wife Worth?" *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (23 November 1920): 3381; W. S. Hovey, "The Standard of Living on the Farm," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (5 November 1925): 1571; "Electricity and Gas in the Home," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (8 June 1929): 972.

plant, a sanitary system of sewage disposal, and a power washing machine until it achieved wealth as it was to try to get along without plows and harrows. The *Homestead* echoed this idea later the same month--stating that efficiency in the home was just as important as efficiency in the field and calling for home improvement projects "in every county of Iowa." Though this was "the age of automobiles, tractors, riding plows and all sorts of labor-saving conveniences for the men folks," the farm home had not been modernized because the farmer saw no direct financial return to be gained from labor-saving devices in the house. This type of thinking was misguided, the *Homestead* insisted. "There would be fewer doctor bills to pay if the tasks of farm women were lightened; there would also be fewer early deaths, and there would be a great deal more happiness and contentment in rural communities."<sup>13</sup>

In July 1920 *Wallaces' Farmer* reported the findings of a United States Department of Agriculture survey concerning women's work on 10,015 farms in 33 northern and western states. The survey found that the typical farm wife worked an average of 11.3 hours a day year round and an average of 13.12 hours a day in the summer. Most of these women had to draw water from a pump or spring, do the laundry without the aid of a washing machine, make and mend the family's clothing, work by a kerosene

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<sup>13</sup>"Freeing the Homemakers," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (3 June 1920): 1865; "Modern Equipment for Farm Home," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (24 June 1920): 2004; "Poor Headwork," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (6 October 1921): 1729.

lamp, bake bread, churn, tend garden, and care for poultry. In addition, many helped with the milking, assisted in caring for livestock, and participated in some part of the field work during six weeks or more out of the year. *Wallaces'* concluded that the report gave rural men very little to brag about.

"Under pioneer conditions, when every member of the family had to work hard and economize in the effort to secure a home, the men folks had a fair defense for allowing their wives to work ten to fourteen hours a day." *Wallaces'* found no reason, however, for women in the corn belt to face such conditions now that pioneer times had ended. Farmers had been making money, but, according to *Wallaces'*, they had been "thinking too much of making more money instead of getting more out life." It was time for men to spend money on raising the standard of living and on making farm life easier for wives and mothers.<sup>14</sup>

A Standard Plumbing Fixtures advertisement in *Wallaces' Farmer* concurred, asserting that "A Modern Home is a Wife and Mother Saver." The ad reported that a recent bulletin issued by the Missouri College of Agriculture had give the kitchen sink, bath tub, wash bowl, toilet, hot water, and stationary laundry tubs "first consideration in the ideal modern rural home." Such equipment, according to the bulletin, reduced the hours and lessened the strain of work for women. "If your home is not provided with these *first* essentials of your family's health, comfort and contentment," advised the ad, "write for our

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<sup>14</sup>"The Farm Wife's Work," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (16 July 1920): 1754.

catalogue of 'Standard Plumbing Fixtures for the Farm.' It . . . points the way to greater happiness for wife, mother, children--and you."<sup>15</sup>

The Hearts and Homes section of *Wallaces' Farmer* argued that women themselves were mostly to blame if they did not obtain conveniences when finances permitted. While some men were stingy, Hearts and Homes acknowledged, most would cooperate if their wives expressed their needs. Similarly, "Aunt Elizabeth," author of *The Iowa Homestead's* column "The Sunny Window," concluded that women were too often responsible for their own drudgery. "Sometimes I blame women for all the work there is in the world. Do you think a man would wash dishes three times a day, year in and year out, without trying to make the job easier?" She and others encouraged farm women to embrace--even invent--new, easier ways of working and advised them not to feel guilty about abandoning grandmother's old-fashioned methods. Aunt Elizabeth looked forward to the day when every home in town and country would be equipped with every reasonably priced electrical device. She laughed at "sentimental talk about Dear Mother" who washed overalls on a washboard. The modern model husband would not "wipe his eye with a crepe bordered hanky and talk regretfully about what a good worker Fanny was." Instead he would "[dust] out while his

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<sup>15</sup>Standard advertisement, *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (9 September 1921): 1130.



wife [was] still fresh and blooming and [buy] her a washing machine."<sup>16</sup>

*Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* also discussed women's desire for leisure. Besides material comforts and conveniences, women needed opportunities for social, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual enrichment. Not only did rural Iowans need to reform the way they spent money, they also needed to reassess the way they used their time. *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* urged readers to spend more time doing things that did not contribute directly or immediately to increased production. Both periodicals insisted that it would be far more profitable in the long run for women and men to participate in off-farm activities that taught them something new, boosted their morale, encouraged cooperation, or enhanced the community. Women's articles in particular focused readers' attention on the issue of time. Women were encouraged to look for short-cuts in their daily routines, to eliminate unnecessary work, and to take time

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<sup>16</sup>"The Farm Wife Discovered," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (6 August 1920): 1912; "The Sunny Window," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (13 March 1924): 478; "The Sunny Window," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (9 April 1925): 597. See Colt advertisement, *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (24 September 1920): 2256; "The Sunny Window," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (5 June 1924): 985; "The Sunny Window," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (9 July 1925): 1012; "Mrs. Reifsteck Discusses Electricity for the Farm Wife," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (7 October 1926): 1484; "The Sunny Window," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (31 March 1927): 586; Colin Kennedy, "Farm Homes in Electrification," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (8 September 1927): 1376; "Home Economics Short Course at Ames," *The Iowa Homestead* 73 (20 March 1928): 490; Mildred Deischer, "The Chance of Electrical Equipment," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (21 February 1929): 357.

to participate actively in local clubs, churches, and social and cultural events. The farm, both periodicals admitted, was a great thief of leisure. Women, especially, needed to ensure that they were not working so hard to make a living that they neglected to enjoy life. One farmer's wife wrote to *Wallaces'* that leisure and rest for the farm family was not extravagant but necessary. "The time and place for the best of farm life is now . . . Happiness does not come at the end of life in loaves, but through life, in crumbs." Likewise, Hilda Richmond wrote to *The Iowa Homestead* that it would take more than labor-saving devices to keep women content on the farm. Rural women needed to enjoy small pleasures regularly--such as going to town once a week, attending church socials and services, participating in club activities, visiting relatives, and entertaining friends. She also advised that a trim lawn, an attractive landscape, and orderly premises would prevent farm women from becoming unhappy and dissatisfied with rural life.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>"Flat Tires," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (18 March 1921): 522; Hilda Richmond, "Keeping Mrs. Farmer Contented," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (25 August 1921): 1493. See "Take the Irk Out of Work," *The Iowa Homestead* (22 January 1920): 364; "The Women at Home Not Standing Still," *The Iowa Homestead* (24 June 1920): 2024; "The Farm Problem," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (30 April 1920): 1272; "One Woman's Way," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (17 September 1920): 2196; "Wait on Yourself," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (6 January 1921): 36; "From Our Letter File," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (1 April 1921): 590; "'Why Didn't You Take Them?'" *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (12 August 1921): 1048; "Looking Forward to the New Year," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (27 January 1922): 110; "Our Right to Leisure," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (6 January

Women who were convinced they could live pleasant, interesting, and comfortable lives on the farm promised to bring the dream of rural civilization closer to realization. In theory, conditions that produced women who enjoyed rural life would also produce children who would choose to stay in the country. The Hearts and Homes section of *Wallaces' Farmer* suggested in 1920 that the way children saw their mothers respond to farm life determined to a large degree whether they would embrace the rural lifestyle or become ashamed of it. Some women drove their children from the farm while others made their children feel that "'farming was the only big business on God's green earth.'" If women were interested in and committed to rural life, *Wallaces'* observed, there would be little difficulty in "keeping the boys on the farm." Nevertheless, rural children were the subject of much discussion in their own right. During the 1920s *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* advised rural parents of ways to make farm life more rewarding for their children.<sup>18</sup>

Both periodicals placed a great deal of emphasis on parent-child relationships. They suggested that the farm child, especially the older male child, needed to feel he had a real stake in the farm's success and that he was valued--not as a source of cheap labor but as a partner. In 1923 *Wallaces'*

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1928): 16; "A Cross Section of Rural Life in Iowa," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (4 August 1927): 1220.

<sup>18</sup>"Keeping the Boys on the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (5 November 1920): 2574.

*Farmer* printed the comments of a young Iowan who credited his father with keeping him content on the farm. According to this young man, farmers would prevent their sons from joining the drift to the cities by making them their confidants, pals, and partners.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, *The Iowa Homestead* printed the advice of George Powell, a farmer from Crawford County, who urged men desiring to keep their sons on the farm to "chum" with their boys while they were small. He instructed fathers to teach children how to help with jobs around the farm--even if this complicated and delayed the completion of tasks. He also recommended allowing children to participate in club work and supplying them with a pig or calf to raise and sell. In addition, Powell believed fathers should include their sons in business decisions as they matured. "[Make your boy] feel you are for him," Powell concluded, "and nine times out of ten he will stick to the farm." In addition, *The Iowa Homestead* urged fathers to keep their sons interested in farm life by supplying them with all-purpose farm engines. Many farm boys were mechanically inclined, according to the *Homestead*, and would be likely to abandon farming for a mechanical job in the city if not provided with opportunities to tinker with engines and machines. Therefore a father should

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<sup>19</sup>"How I Came to Stay on the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (16 February 1923): 254.

take precautions by enabling his son to satisfy his craving for mechanics right on the farm.<sup>20</sup>

*Wallaces' Hearts and Homes* section sponsored a contest in 1924 asking mothers to respond to the question "What Are You Going to Make of this Boy of Yours?" Five prize-winning letters were published. Each expressed the mother's hope that her son would pursue whatever he was "best fitted for" but emphasized her desire that he would choose farming for his profession. Ruth Finch, mother of two high-school-aged boys on a farm in Fulton, Kentucky and winner of fourth prize, advocated developing children's interests in rural life by allowing them to take part in the responsibilities and rewards of farm activities. To this end, Finch had provided her boys with animals to raise and sell, furnished them with tools and lumber, granted them opportunities and facilities for recreation, permitted them to entertain guests, and encouraged them to express their ideas about how to run the farm. *Wallaces' Farmer* published similar advice in an article titled "Bringing Up the Farm Family" by Josephine Wylie, urging rural parents to make life on the farm so attractive that children would have no desire to abandon it. This ideal, according to Wylie, could be achieved only as parents attempted to understand and respect their children, allowed their children to harbor and express

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<sup>20</sup>"To Keep Boys on the Farm," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (20 March 1924): 536; "Keeping the Boys on the Farm," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (8 May 1924): 831. See "Retiring on the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (21 December 1928): 1750; "Farm Children Are Lucky," *Wallaces' Farmer* 54 (19 July 1929): 1021.

their own opinions, and made good books, music, art, and recreation available on the farm.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to counseling better relationships between parents and children, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* advocated improvements in rural education. Heated discussions regarding the best ways to educate rural children had taken place during the Country Life Movement, and many of the same issues were debated in *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* throughout the 1920s. One prominent subject was the tendency of public schools to educate children away from the country. *The Iowa Homestead* was particularly vigilant in addressing this concern. In 1927 the *Homestead* reported that each year of high school education received by an Iowa farm boy rendered him less likely to choose farming as a career. This did not mean, according to the *Homestead*, that too much education was bad for farm boys. The problem was that most rural students who wished to pursue secondary education had to attend city high schools where there was little interest in or concern for country life. Town-reared teachers tended to hold agricultural work in low esteem and typically, though unintentionally, conveyed this attitude to their pupils. The *Homestead* even criticized the agricultural courses offered at most Iowa high schools as

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<sup>21</sup>"What Are You Going to Make of This Boy of Yours?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (14 November 1924): 1484-5; Josephine Wylie, "Bringing Up the Farm Family," *Wallaces' Farmer* 51 (12 February 1926): 222. See A. W. Turner, "Making Farm and Farming Attractive," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (30 December 1920): 3410.

uninspired and incapable of teaching farm boys to be better farmers. Boys who had entered high school with the intention of becoming farmers too often, according to the *Homestead*, abandoned their original plans and began training for an overcrowded profession. Further, even Iowa's agricultural college at Ames tended to produce graduates who had no intention of farming. As a result, the country was routinely robbed of its brightest, most promising offspring.<sup>22</sup>

The *Homestead* did not respond to the situation by advocating that education for rural students be confined primarily to agricultural subjects. Some educational reformers had entertained ideas of this kind during the Country Life Movement but had met with firm resistance from the rural population. Parents overwhelmingly opposed any plan which threatened to limit their children's options to the farm. They tended to favor a standard education for their children--one which emphasized traditional reading, writing, and arithmetical skills. The *Iowa Homestead*, apparently aware of the arguments against specialized education for rural students, maintained that farm children should have educational opportunities equal to those of city children but that the instruction of rural pupils should not necessarily be identical to the instruction of

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<sup>22</sup>W. H. Lancelot, "The March of the Farm Boys," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (7 April 1927): 618; "Some Needs of Our Educational System," *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (16 August 1923): 1175. See David B. Danbom, "Rural Education Reform and the Country Life Movement," *Agricultural History* 53 (April 1979): 462-74.

urban students. According to the *Homestead*, the rural public had a right to expect schools to produce men and women who possessed both technical and practical knowledge of farming, who were capable of directing cooperative activities, and who harbored a "real love of the land." To this end, *The Iowa Homestead* argued that, at the very minimum, Iowa schools should offer instruction in several subjects related to rural concerns--such as vocational agriculture, agricultural economics, and rural sociology to those who wanted it.<sup>23</sup>

*Wallaces' Farmer* focused its complaints on substandard conditions in country schools which kept rural children "considerably behind children of the same age in city schools." According to *Wallaces'*, intelligence tests administered to Iowa farm children by psychologists indicated that rural boys and girls were only "about 92 per cent as bright as average city children." *Wallaces'* suspected that these tests revealed less about inherent differences between rural and city children and

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<sup>23</sup>Wayne E. Fuller, "Making Better Farmers: the Study of Agriculture in Midwestern Country Schools," *Agricultural History* 60 (Spring 1986): 154-68; W. H. Lancelot, "The March of the Farm Boys," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (7 April 1927): 618; "Some Needs of Our Educational System," *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (16 August 1923): 1175. See "Eight Grades Not Enough," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (25 March 1921): 556; "To Teach Co-operation in Schools," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (23 July 1925): 1050; "More Farmers' Sons and Daughters Going to Iowa City," *The Iowa Homestead* 71 (29 July 1926): 1118; "Macy Campbell Stood for Square Deal to Rural Youth," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (5 May 1927): 779; "More Support for Vocational Education," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (11 April 1929): 668.



more about the quality of education and training they had enjoyed. Wallaces' assigned the blame for the deficiencies of rural children to poorly trained country school teachers and inadequate country schools. For instance, Wallaces' reported in 1922 that only one-fourth the amount spent on the average city child was spent on the average country pupil. Much of the responsibility for discrepancies of this kind, according to both Wallaces' *Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead*, lay at the feet of Iowa's urban population. The farmer--whose property tax was the principle source of income for the country school--received too little remuneration for his work to be able to finance top-notch education for his children. Only as prices for farm products recovered would Iowa farmers have a realistic chance of improving rural education. When conditions for agriculture became more favorable, Wallaces' predicted, every farmer who hoped for a higher rural civilization would work to provide rural children with the best education possible.<sup>24</sup>

Until then, the plight of rural education, according to both periodicals, was not simply a rural problem. The rural school bore the burden of educating not only those who stayed in

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<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of farm real estate taxes and gross farm cash income during this period, see United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1941), 788-9. "The Hope of the Future," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (14 July 1922): 833; H. A. Wallace, "The City's Greatest Debt to the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (9 May 1924): 725, 733. See "The Intelligence of Farm Children," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (5 December 1924): 1557.

the country but also those who left in droves for the city. Henry A. Wallace estimated in 1924 that two-thirds of the nation's farm children were staying on the farm while one-third were moving to the cities. Wallace suggested, therefore, that "it would be sound economic policy for the cities of the government of the United States to pay one-third of the country school expenses." *The Iowa Homestead* agreed that state aid was needed to prevent children from being deprived of quality education simply because they lived in a poor district.<sup>25</sup>

Many Country Lifers who had promoted the modernization of country schools had advocated consolidation, but this remained an extremely controversial topic throughout the 1920s. Neither *Wallaces' Farmer* nor *The Iowa Homestead* took a firm stance on the issue. Some opponents of consolidation were motivated by emotional or ideological attachments to the small country school house. Others opposed consolidation primarily because they believed that the expense was too great and that the burden of financing this improvement fell too heavily on the backs of farmers who already bore more than their fair share of tax burdens. Both *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* appeared to accept the concept of consolidation--theoretically. Both appreciated the idea that, in the absence of towns and well-defined neighborhoods, consolidated rural schools could provide a

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<sup>25</sup>H. A. Wallace, "The City's Greatest Debt to the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (9 May 1924): 725, 733; "The State's Duty in Regard to Rural Education," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (31 March 1927): 574. See "State Aid for Schools," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (23 March 1928): 474.

center--physically, socially, and emotionally--for the development of strong rural communities and serve as community buildings where everyone in the district had opportunities to attend lectures, club meetings, social gatherings, contests, demonstrations, musical events, sports activities, and public discussions. Neither publication, however, was willing to lend the campaign for consolidation unqualified support--largely due to the strength of financial arguments against it and to concerns that consolidation might make rural schools duplicates of those in urban areas.<sup>26</sup>

Whether for or against consolidation, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* urged readers to be sensitive to the needs of rural children. Without stable, intelligent rural populations, rural communities would crumble and, with them, any hope of rural civilization. In order to maintain a rural population capable of building a rural civilization, *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* believed children needed to have positive and

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<sup>26</sup>See Fuller, "Making Better Farmers," 154-69; Wayne E. Fuller, "Changing Concepts of the Country School As a Community Center in the Midwest," *Agricultural History* 58 (1984): 423-41; Macy Campbell, "The Rural School of the Future," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (5 March 1920): 770; "Educating Farm Children," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (2 September 1920): 2441; "The Ideal behind Consolidated Schools," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (21 July 1921): 1326; "Encouraging Community Progress," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (27 October 1921): 1487; "The Farmers' Right to Consolidated Schools," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (15 December 1922): ?; "Iowa's Smaller Rural Schools," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (28 May 1925): 844; "The 'Country Schools' and Their Work," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (4 June 1925): 870; "Iowa Consolidated School Laws," *The Iowa Homestead* 70 (23 July 1925): 1056.

rewarding experiences in the farm home and in the country school. Parents needed to teach their children that agriculture was a significant, stimulating, and satisfying calling. Rural schools (and city high schools where there were no rural high schools) needed to validate the importance of farming by offering course work relevant to agriculture and rural living, by instructing students in the principles and practice of cooperation and community building, and by equipping them to solve the problems of agriculture and to develop an attractive rural civilization.

*Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* also portrayed the development of rural culture as necessary for the establishment of rural civilization. As mechanical equipment reduced the number of hours farm families had to work to secure a living, *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* believed their readers would be freed to engage in a wide variety of cultural pursuits. Articles, editorials, and columns encouraged appreciation for and interest in aesthetic and intellectual endeavors and called for artistic activity which expressed or illuminated rural experiences and values.<sup>27</sup>

*Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* suggested that making cultural institutions and activities available in rural communities would prevent country people from having to fulfill their desire for culture in towns and cities. Rural communities could, according

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<sup>27</sup> See "How Many Hours of Work?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (13 July 1923): 983; "This Mechanical Age," *The Iowa Homestead* 74 (25 April 1929): 766.

to both periodicals, provide access to great literature, sponsor lectures and debates, develop musical talent, and even show motion pictures. Not only would these types of activities educate, entertain, and uplift individuals but shared cultural pursuits would also stimulate interaction between neighbors thereby strengthening identity with and pride in the rural community.<sup>28</sup>

Rural civilization could not simply borrow from urban culture. *Wallaces' Farmer* argued that rural communities needed their own artists and intellectuals whose work reflected a uniquely rural culture. *Wallaces'* believed that if Iowa was ever "to have a rural civilization worth while, there must be a big place in it for artists of all kinds and particularly for authors." Rural communities needed to support the efforts of men and women to give the rural experience new significance through the medium of art.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>See "Can Moving Pictures Be Brought to the Farm?" *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (26 August 1920): 2386; "Presenting Farm Conditions Through Moving Pictures," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (31 March 1921): 729; Kenneth S. Clark, "Music in Farm Communities," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (7 July 1921): 1265; "Glimpses of Community Life in Rural Iowa," *The Iowa Homestead* 73 (14 June 1928): 1008; "Farm Community Halls," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (1 May 1925): 643; "More Books to Read," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (4 February 1927): 167.

<sup>29</sup>Donald R. Murphy, "The Farm in Fiction," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (30 October 1925): 1429. See "For Successful Living," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (6 May 1927): 687.

*Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* also attempted to foster an appreciation for indigenous rural cultural activities--activities that would not, in most cases, be recognized as having aesthetic or intellectual value in urban circles. While H. L. Mencken and other arbiters of urban taste criticized the country's lack of culture, *Wallaces' Farmer* and the *Homestead* maintained that the production of healthy hogs and vigorous corn had aesthetic as well as practical value and suggested that grain shocking, corn husking, and livestock breeding were cultural endeavors worthy of recognition. Both publications urged rural readers to appreciate and reward these types of cultural accomplishments in addition to more conventional intellectual and artistic achievements.<sup>30</sup>

By attending to issues concerning rural cooperation, rural women, rural children, and rural culture, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* accorded value to pursuits and expenditures that had been regarded as superfluous and challenged a dominant rural mindset that historian Lewis Atherton called the cult of the immediately useful and practical. This mindset placed a premium on efforts to subdue the physical environment and encouraged the expenditure of money and time in ways that often

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<sup>30</sup>See "The Cultural Side," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (14 January 1921): 62; "Out of Touch," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (14 December 1923): 1673; "An Outstanding Man," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (13 February 1925): 209; "Beauty," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (22 May 1925): 731; "Life As Interesting on the Farm As on the Movie Stage," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (20 May 1920): 1722; "The Sunny Window," *The Iowa Homestead* 73 (12 July 1928): 1119.

ignored human desires for social interaction, creature comforts, leisure activities, and cultural pursuits. *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* advised readers to adopt a more balanced and satisfying perspective in which improving the quality of life in rural homes and communities took precedence over acquiring land and expanding production.<sup>31</sup>

*Wallaces' Farmer* and the *Homestead* by no means ignored practical agricultural concerns during the 1920s, but both publications refused to limit their advice to matters related to efficient production. *Wallaces' Farmer* frequently contended that an overemphasis on efficiency subverted the real needs and interests of rural Iowans. The great task of the journal, *Wallaces'* believed, was to help readers define what sort of lifestyle they desired and then to assist them in attaining it. *The Iowa Homestead* embraced a more traditional role as farm advisor--placing more confidence in efficient production as the answer to rural problems. But the *Homestead*, too, gave high priority to issues concerning quality of life in the country and counseled readers, like *Wallaces' Farmer*, to reassess priorities regarding time and money and appropriate ways to spend them. In an hour of agricultural recession in which the rural population appeared to be succumbing in large numbers to the attractions of city life, *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* responded to readers'

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<sup>31</sup>See Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1954): 109-16.

concerns and offered visions of an attractive and distinctive rural civilization.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>"Is Efficiency Enough?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (19 June 1925): 848.



## CHAPTER FOUR:

## THE RHETORIC OF NATURE AND THE RURAL IDEAL

The idea of rural distinctiveness promoted by *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* derived its authority from popular perceptions of the rural environment and the rural population's relationship to that environment. *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* portrayed the rural landscape and work that took place in it as natural, attractive, and healthy--distinct from and superior to conditions in an urban environment. The rhetoric of nature and the rural ideal made the suggestion that rural Iowans could create a distinctive rural civilization persuasive. Using this rhetoric, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* evoked and promoted images of a rural civilization capable of holding its own against the attractions of urban life.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, relatively little about rural realities appeared superior to urban conditions in *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* throughout the 1920s. Both periodicals repeatedly pronounced agricultural profits dismal and rural standards of living dissatisfactory. Neither publication believed that farmers should accept such conditions gracefully. Both rejected the notion that producing food was a moral obligation of the farming class, insisting that nothing but

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<sup>1</sup>See David B. Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America," *Agricultural History* 65 (Fall 1991): 1-12.

financial incentive would halt the farmers' exodus to the cities. Urban dwellers enjoyed enormous advantages, *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* observed, and rural people could not be blamed if they chose to claim a fair share of comfort and prosperity by abandoning the country.

Shorter working hours, higher wages, comfortable homes, better schools, abundant social opportunities, and great cultural achievements testified convincingly to the superiority of urban civilization, but *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* failed to concede the inferiority of rural life. Instead both publications advanced images of a rural civilization unconformable to an urban template. *Wallaces'* argued that to follow the path of urban-industrial civilization was a serious mistake. No farmer would consciously choose this course. He would strive instead to "build up a rural civilization with distinctive features of its own." Rural life boasted superior qualities, *Wallaces'* implied, which would provide the foundation for a superior civilization.<sup>2</sup>

*The Iowa Homestead* echoed this assumption as it reminded readers that despite its problems, country living possessed certain compensations. The *Homestead* bolstered this argument by pointing to city people who longed to participate in rural life. In 1921 the *Homestead* noted the death of Al G. Field, a successful minstrel who--despite earning fame and fortune,

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<sup>2</sup>"Is Efficiency Enough?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (19 June 1925): 848.

making millions laugh, and receiving "rounds of applause nightly"--had preferred the natural, genuine joys of farm life to the artificiality of his theatrical shows. Several years before his death, Field had purchased a farm near Columbus, Ohio, which, according to the *Homestead's* account, had become "the big thing in his life." Based on Field's example, the *Homestead* concluded that it was "the genuine things of life" that endured and admonished readers who entertained ideas of leaving the farm for a seemingly more attractive career to be sure they were not "giving up the happiness that lasts, to chase rainbow promises." In 1923 the *Homestead* featured a tale of two men with a common problem. Both loved the country but "fate [had] taken them from the farm." These men (one a mechanic, the other an employee of the postal service) had written letters to *The Iowa Homestead* pouring out their longings for the country. Convinced that these feelings were shared by many others in urban areas, the *Homestead* concluded that farmer's financial problems became less significant when compared to the heartaches and disappointments of the men and women who loved the country but who were trapped in the city.<sup>3</sup>

The rhetoric of nature and the rural ideal employed by *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* portrayed the rural environment as superior to the urban environment in several key

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<sup>3</sup>"Farm Life More Alluring than Theatrical Success," *The Iowa Homestead*, 66 (28 April 1921): 904; "Heartful Longing for the Country," *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (6 July 1923): 1034.

respects. The rural environment afforded health, strength, virility, a good place to raise children, and opportunity for creative interaction with nature. In comparison, cities were "the death chambers of civilization."<sup>4</sup>

According to both *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead*, the country was a much healthier place than the city. In 1920 the *Homestead* reported that men and women in the country lived, on average, 1.8 and 1.3 years longer, respectively, than those in the city. Similarly, *Wallaces' Farmer* noted that despite having longer hours of labor and enjoying fewer comforts, conveniences, and medical aids than urbanites, rural people tended to possess better health and live longer lives. *Wallaces'* speculated this was because city dwellers were compelled to dwell in "plains and hills of concrete," to perform repetitive mechanical tasks, to breath coal smoke and gasoline engine exhaust, to have ears assaulted by street car and automobile traffic, to have eyes insulted by billboards and electric signs, and to be "subjected to the nervous strain and bustle of the town." These types of urban conditions had evolved over less than one hundred years, according to *Wallaces'*, and humans had not yet adjusted to them. On the other hand, men and women had been tilling fields and herding flocks in a rural environment for many centuries and were well-

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<sup>4</sup>"The Lethal Chambers of Civilization," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (2 November 1923): 1472.

suited to a lifestyle that allowed them to consume fresh food, breathe fresh air, and live and work in close contact with the earth. City life was basically abnormal, *Wallaces'* concluded, therefore people who lived in urban areas paid the price in shorter lives and fewer children. According to *Wallaces'*, the offspring of vigorous men and women who left the country for the city were few in number and low in vitality. Succeeding generations became increasingly weak until the strain finally died out. Consequently, cities required continual infusions of new blood from the country or from foreign nations. Because its citizens were unhealthy and not very fertile, *Wallaces'* predicted that urban civilization was likely to be "a fleeting thing." The city was a hot-house that furnished frills and ornaments, whereas the country supplied the nation with fresh food and new blood.<sup>5</sup>

Criticisms of industrial work often accompanied the agricultural press's praise of rural life. In an effort to

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<sup>5</sup>"Farmers Live Longer Than City Residents," *The Iowa Homestead* 65 (10 June 1920): 1904; "His Years Shall Be Many," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (18 September 1925): 1198; "The Scars of Industrialism," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (7 September 1928): 1200; "Health in Country and City," *Wallaces' Farmer* 54 (10 May 1929): 725; "A Utopia of Extinction," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (6 June 1924): 843. See "The Basic Industry," *Wallaces' Farmer* 47 (14 April 1922): 486; "The Lethal Chambers of Civilization," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (2 November 1923): 1472; H. A. Wallace "The City's Greatest Debt to the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 49 (9 May 1924): 725, 733; "Odds and Ends," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (27 November 1925): 1553; "Country Versus City," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (11 May 1928): 744.

point out the advantages of agricultural labor, *The Iowa Homestead* maintained: "It is one thing to work out in God's good sunshine . . . and a far different thing to stand in one position day after day, going through the same mechanical motions . . . with the roar of machinery always in one's ears, as the factory worker is compelled to do." *Wallaces' Farmer* warned readers that city life threatened to reduce Americans to automats. While conceding that farm families rarely enjoyed as many opportunities to encounter beautiful music and famous paintings as did city dwellers, *Wallaces' Farmer* asserted that rural people had "a much greater opportunity to work in an efficient way with the forces of nature." The farmer's hard labor was rewarded with the pleasure of creation, and his long hours of drudgery produced "a sound ear of corn, a strong colt, or a fine apple."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, *The Iowa Homestead*, referred to agriculture as "a partnership with Providence," saying that there was a "divine sanction" and nobility about the farming profession. In April 1928 the *Homestead* printed the "Country Boy's Creed," which touched upon "some of the things which [tended] to hold men and

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<sup>6</sup>"Learning How the Other Half Lives and Works," *The Iowa Homestead* 15 January 45 (1920): 194; "Thanksgiving," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (20 November 1925): 1518; "'The Wide Composure of the Sky,'" *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (30 September 1921): 1213; "The Basic Industry," *Wallaces' Farmer* 67 (14 April 1922): 486; "Beauty," *Wallaces' Farmer* 50 (22 May 1925): 731; James Hearst, "When You Subtract the Dollars, What's Left?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 54 (31 May 1929): 813, 818.

women to the farm, even in the face of handicaps." The statement of faith asserted that "the country which God made is more beautiful than the city which man made; that life out-of-doors and in touch with the earth is the natural life of man," and that "work . . . with nature is more inspiring than work with the most intricate machinery."<sup>7</sup>

Essay contests sponsored by *Wallaces' Farmer* emphasized the desirability of farm life and the importance of intimacy with nature. Issues published in December 1927 printed readers' replies to the question "Are You Glad You Went to Farming?" Many responses were submitted by women who answered that, despite the strain of hard work and economic difficulties, they would choose farm life again because they believed the country sunshine, clean air, open spaces, and fresh food made the farm the best place to raise children. To Mrs. C. L. Gruver of Fayette County "the beauty which [was] a part of every-day life on the farm" was of utmost value in persuading her of the rural lifestyle's intrinsic worth. She did not believe farm work had to be drudgery. Through careful systemization and management, she and her family made time to enjoy life in the country and kept alive their appreciation of beauty. Mrs. E. J. Kirk, residing near Wilmington, Ohio, stated that her family believed "thoroly [sic] . . . in a rural style of living," and, with

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<sup>7</sup>"Farming a Partnership with Providence," *The Iowa Homestead* 69 (8 May, 1924): 822; "Country Boy's Creed," *The Iowa Homestead* 53 (5 April 1928): 534.

possession of an automobile, had no desire to live elsewhere. "The smell of fresh earth in an April shower," Kirk observed, was "not to be compared to the stale odors of a big city." I. S. Colman of Callao, Missouri, agreed that the rural environment was clearly preferable--especially for raising a family. Children on the farm lived "close to nature and her many miracles" and were not "in contact with the evils so prevalent in the city."<sup>8</sup>

*Wallaces' Farmer* reported that most of the more than one hundred responses it had received indicated that while farm income was unsatisfactory, the farm remained the best place to live because it provided the opportunity to participate in the drama of the natural world, because it taught children responsibility but afforded plenty of room for play, and because the automobile, telephone, and radio had made it possible to enjoy social interaction without the undesirable aspects of town life. In an article published by *Wallaces'* in 1929, James Hearst, a farmer from Blackhawk County, expressed impatience with "romantic stories about [his] vocation"--especially since during the period of post-war deflation farmers had been offered "little more than rhapsodies on the joys of farm life in return for loss of earning power." Still, like those who responded to

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<sup>8</sup>"Another Kind of Farm Income," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (9 December 1927): 1598; "Are You Glad You Went to Farming?," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (9 December 1927): 1597; "What Make Farm Life Worthwhile?" *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (16 December 1927): 1631.



Wallaces' aforementioned query, Hearst concluded that even without much financial incentive farming remained an extremely desirable occupation because it afforded close contact with the natural world.<sup>9</sup>

Recognition that the distinctive, attractive qualities of rural life were primarily associated with the rural landscape appeared to encourage interest in protecting the country's environmental advantages by limiting unsightly advertisements, guarding wild flowers, and creating rural parks. In 1921 the *Homestead* expressed disdain for billboards in pastures, at the entrance of towns, and especially in scenic spots. "Travel through the rugged, beautiful mountain sections of our country and you will note here and there where beauty spots have been destroyed by unsightly signs," complained the *Homestead*. Such advertisements should be discouraged if not actually prohibited." In 1927 *Homestead* columnist Aunt Elizabeth called readers' attention to a notice she had received from the Women's National Farm and Garden Association advising rural residents not to plaster their barns, pastures, and woodlands with signboards. She believed additional measures would be needed in order to protect the countryside. Farmers, she observed, were neighborly and generous and liked to share "the beauty and

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<sup>9</sup>"Another Kind of Farm Income," *Wallaces' Farmer* 52 (9 December 1927): 1598; James Hearst, "When You Subtract the Dollars, What's Left?," *Wallaces' Farmer* 54 (31 May 1929): 813, 818. See "Young Folks and the Farm," *Wallaces' Farmer* 53 (6 January 1928): 20.

fullness of the land." But for hills, woods, and streams to retain<sup>y</sup> "their original freshness and fairness," both urban and rural people would have to be more appreciative of and careful in the country. Other articles in *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* advocated wild flower protection and the creation of rural parks--suggesting that both periodicals believed it wise to preserve and enhance the attractions of Iowa's rural landscape.<sup>10</sup>

Faced with difficult financial circumstances and suffering from decreased social status, farmers had precious little to celebrate about rural life in the 1920s. Using the rhetoric of nature and the rural ideal, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* reaffirmed the importance of farming and reminded farm families of their privileges. If the type of rural civilization advocated by *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* was to become a reality, rural communities desperately needed to retain the farm's brightest and most talented men, women, and youth. Encouraging farm families to appreciate the rural landscape and to pride themselves in having a special relationship with nature

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<sup>10</sup>"Signboards Mar Sightlines of Rural Roadsides," *The Iowa Homestead* 66 (21 July 1921): 1329; "The Sunny Window," *The Iowa Homestead* 72 (28 April 1927): 756. See "How to Improve the Neighborhood," *Wallaces' Farmer* 45 (27 August 1920): 2040; "National Conference on Parks," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (28 January 1921): 166; "Rural Parks," *Wallaces' Farmer* 46 (4 March 1921): 436; Harriet Wallace Ashby, "Our Vanishing Wild-flowers," *Wallaces' Farmer* 48 (30 March 1922): 2; "Iowa's Wild Flowers Well Worth Saving," *The Iowa Homestead* 68 (6 July 1923): 1034.

provided an important antidote to the loathing and desire for escape that grim financial situations sometimes produced. If *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* convinced country people that the joys of rural life outweighed high-paying factory jobs and urban amenities, perhaps country communities could survive until agricultural prosperity returned.

The rhetoric of nature and the rural ideal served to reassure Iowa farm families experiencing a serious crisis of identity during the 1920s. According to historian Dorothy Schwieder, "Everywhere farm people looked they saw their way of life contrasted with town living and subsequently described as deficient, backward, and greatly in need of change." The nation no longer regarded them as its most important citizens, and widespread discouragement and dissatisfaction threatened to decimate an already declining rural population. In order to combat readers' feelings of discontent and despair, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* employed idealized images of the rural or "natural" environment and used them to restore the farm family's sense of identity and importance. By identifying the rural population with a highly prized natural environment, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* justified their assertions that, despite difficult circumstances, farmers and their families possessed the potential to build a desirable and distinctive rural civilization. The country landscape, as

popularly perceived and as portrayed in both papers, was the implied source of rural distinctiveness and superiority.<sup>11</sup>

Though the images purveyed through the rhetoric of nature and the rural ideal suggested otherwise, by 1930, according to James Shidler, the distinctions between rural and urban living had diminished. Although the 1920s had featured a series of angry cultural and political confrontations between city and country, the same decade saw the American nation--country as well as city--finally committed to "urbanization, industrialization, corporatism, never-ending economic growth," and mass production and consumption of material goods. Increasingly, the similarities between rural and urban lifestyles began to outnumber the differences. Nevertheless, rural and urban environments retained distinctive characteristics resulting from different styles of land use.<sup>12</sup>

Environmental historian William Cronon argued in *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* that, although apparently distinctive, landscapes of city and country are not separate; they are essentially complementary--not contradictory. The same values, decisions, and processes that produced a megalopolis, such as Chicago, produced its hinterlands. This conclusion does not suggest, however, that life in the country has never differed substantially from life in the city. It is

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<sup>11</sup>Dorothy Schwieder, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s: Conflict and Continuity," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (Summer 1983): 112.

<sup>12</sup>Shidler, 285.

completely possible to accept Cronon's thesis that both city and country are human artifacts (equally natural, equally artificial), to accept *Wallaces' Farmer* and the *Homestead's* testimonies that experiences in rural and urban areas differed dramatically throughout the 1920s, and to accept James Shidler's conclusion that conditions in country and city became less distinctive by 1930. Each of these perspectives contribute to a full understanding of rural life in the 1920s. Cronon's work warns students to be wary of accepting the rural-urban dichotomy at face value. The rhetoric of *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* reveals the potency of perceived dichotomy during the twenties, while Shidler's article explores the dichotomy's demise.<sup>13</sup>

Both Cronon and Shidler invite students to take a closer look at *Wallaces' Farmer* and the *Homestead's* portrayal of rural distinctiveness. Cronon's thesis implicitly calls into question the periodicals' assumptions about the superiority of the rural environment. Shidler's work, on the other hand, challenges the idea that rural-agrarian advisors, such as *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead*, provided their audiences with the vision and leadership needed to support an alternative approach to urban-industrial modernization. Indeed, Shidler hints that most farm periodicals fostered the decline rather than the cultivation of

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<sup>13</sup>William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991): 371-85; Shidler, 284-5.

rural distinctiveness--a conclusion bolstered by David Danbom's portrayal of the Country Life Movement as a force that contributed to the transformation of the rural world into an urban likeness. Although both *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* may have sought to recast the Movement's ideals in forms more sensitive to the proclivities of rural audiences, the visions of rural civilization promoted by both publications were unmistakably influenced by Country Life agendas. Neither periodical wished to see the rural world recreated in an urban image; nevertheless both *Wallaces Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* routinely measured rural life according to urban standards and advocated changes in country life that were, at bottom, intended to reduce the magnitude of difference between rural and urban lifestyles.<sup>14</sup>

To accept urban influences while emphasizing the virtues of rural distinctiveness and superiority appears contradictory, but it may have performed an important function. Rural sociologist Michael Bell has argued convincingly that the idea of rural distinctiveness retains its importance as a source of identity despite academic attacks on the notion of essential differences between rural and urban environment and experience. As rural Americans sought to improve their living standards by acquiring urban-industrial goods, the rhetoric of nature and the rural ideal as well as the concept of a distinctive rural civilization

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<sup>14</sup>Shidler, 296; Danbom, *Resisted Revolution*, 25-46.

became more rather than less significant to *Wallaces' Farmer*, *The Iowa Homestead*, and their readers--allowing them to accept and emulate urban standards without relinquishing rural identity. The rhetoric of nature and the rural ideal, by focusing attention on the "natural" physical landscape which remained visibly different from the urban civilization's "artificial" physical landscape, encouraged confidence in the idea of rural distinctiveness.<sup>15</sup>

*Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* promoted what they believed most rural Iowans desired--the comforts and cultural advantages of city life blended with the environmental advantages and intimacy with nature offered by life in the country. Neither periodical hastened to condemn or commend those who abandoned the countryside. While acknowledging the compelling nature of economic factors that pushed and pulled people from rural to urban areas, both periodicals frequently emphasized the positive characteristics of rural life and affirmed readers' decisions to stay on the farm. To readers who remained in the country, *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* advocated reforms which promised to secure the advantages of urban life for farm families and their communities. Neither periodical, however, abandoned the idea of rural distinctiveness. By employing the rhetoric of nature and the

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<sup>15</sup>Michael M. Bell, "The Fruit of Difference: The Rural-Urban Continuum as a System of Identity," *Rural Sociology* 57 (Spring 1992): 65-6, 77-80.

rural ideal *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead* attempted to persuade rural Iowans that they could create a rural civilization which would be equal to urban civilization but distinct from it. This ideal may have been impossible to realize, but it did not constitute poverty of vision. Both periodicals proffered a vision of rural civilization that enabled readers to pursue the urban advantages they wanted without having to sacrifice rural identity. *Wallaces' Farmer* and *The Iowa Homestead* did little to prevent rural Iowans' integration into urban mass culture, but they assisted readers' in defining and pursuing the type of civilization they desired--a civilization that sought to combine the best of rural and urban life.

The dream of distinctive rural civilization with its own vital communities and culture was left mostly unrealized at the end of the twentieth century. *Wallaces'* and the *Homestead's* hope, however, that rural families would cease to be denied access to the advantages enjoyed by urban families in the 1920s had become reality for the small number of people who remained on the farm in the late 1990s. Nevertheless, the struggle to make rural life as attractive and comfortable as city life never became easy. Efforts to ensure that farm living standards could be comparable to urban standards made farming more demanding and competitive than ever before. Increasingly, however, America's dwindling number of farm families enjoyed confidence that they were not descending into poverty. While stereotypes of rural



backwardness had not vanished, rural life was more often portrayed as desirable than as deprived. Although the gap between city and country standards of living had never been narrower than in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, perceptions of difference still remained powerful. The rhetoric of nature and the rural ideal retained its persuasiveness for many Americans--rural and urban alike. For most who remained in (or, in some cases, returned to) the country, the idea of a superior rural environment and intimacy with nature continued to be a source of identity and a proof of rural distinctiveness.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>See Dorothy Schwieder, "Iowa: The Middle Land," in *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*, ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 291; Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism," 8-12.

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